

ועידת התביעות  
Claims Conference  
Conference on Jewish Material Claims  
Against Germany

## Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library respects the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection. The Library holds the rights and permissions to put this material online. If you hold an active copyright to this work and would like to have your materials removed from the web please contact the USHMM Library by phone at 202-479-9717, or by email at [digital\\_library@ushmm.org](mailto:digital_library@ushmm.org).

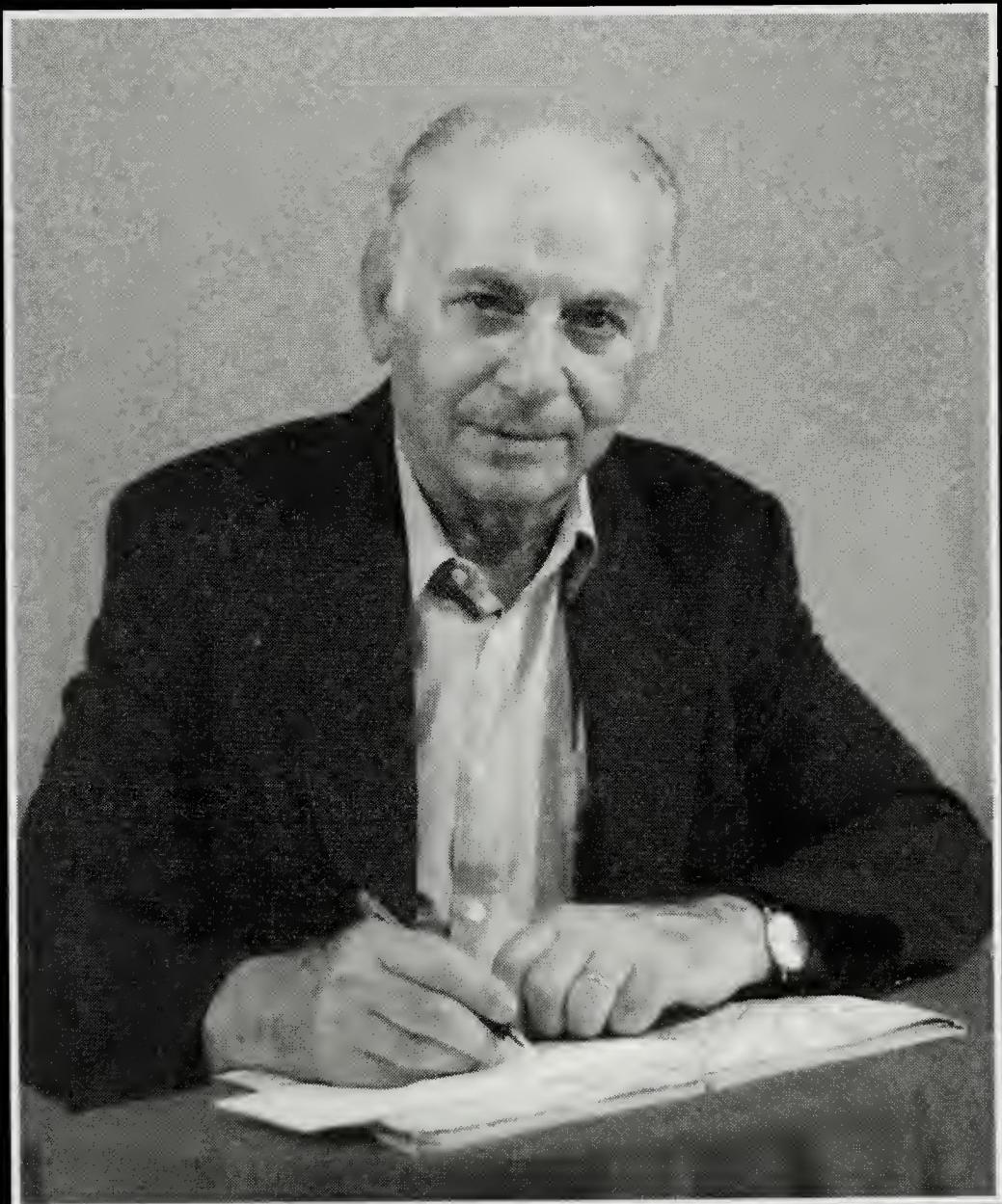


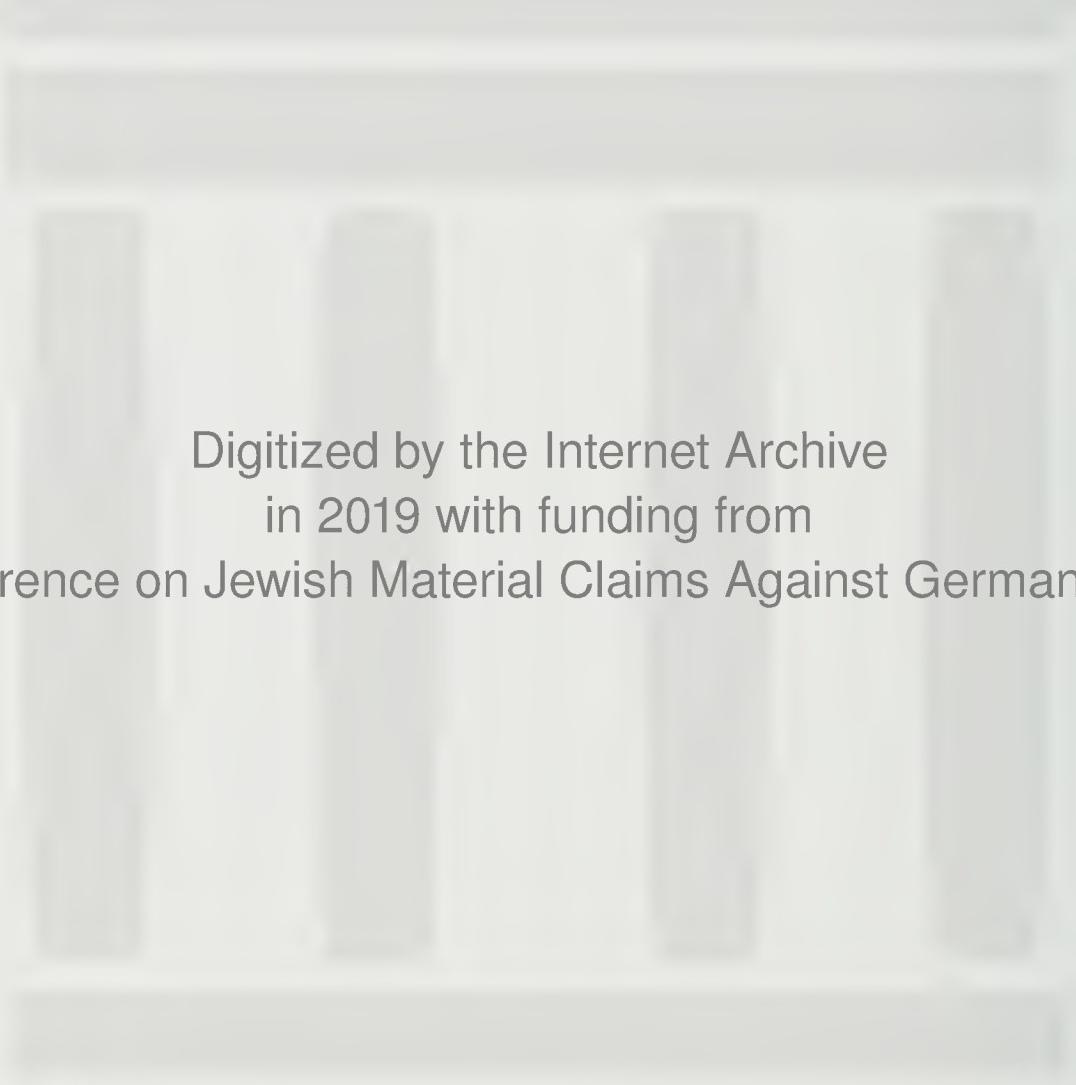
DAVID KAYE

---

---

# I Still Remember





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2019 with funding from  
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.

<https://archive.org/details/istillremember02kaye>





# I Still Remember

David Kaye

DS  
135  
H93  
K39  
1996  
c.2

Copyright © David Kaye 1996  
All rights reserved.

This book is copyright. Other than for the purposes and subject to  
the conditions prescribed under the Copyright Act 1968,  
no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,  
microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted  
without prior written permission.

ISBN 0 646 30552 2

Edited by Ruth Wajnyb, LARA Consultancy Pty Ltd  
PO Box 8, Waverley NSW 2024  
email: [ruthwaj@con.com.au](mailto:ruthwaj@con.com.au)

---

For my grandchildren -  
Alexander, Talia, and Adam

---

## Acknowledgments

I want to record my gratitude for the invaluable help given to me by various people in the form of research, editorial assistance and advice. The manuscript was typed by my wife, Alice. Without her support and unfailing patience this book would not have been started and certainly not finished.

I want to thank Ruth Wajnryb for her help in editing the work and in correcting my grammatical aberrations, especially my past tenses. I am afraid it worked both ways, because at our last encounter, I detected a slight Hungarian accent in her speech.

I also wish to thank my son, Robert, and my daughter-in-law, Bella, for their continuous support and encouragement.

Last but not least, I thank my grandchildren who inspire and remind me to think of the future, not only the past.

---

## **Foreword**

*I Still Remember* is, of course, an intensely personal story. It provides an insight into the life and times of my father, from his simple roots in a small Hungarian town, through his childhood and ultimate recruitment to forced labour and deportation. In doing so, it provides an enchanting view of humanity at its worst and best. It is a sober reminder of the fundamentals of human existence and the layers of so-called civilisation which are so easily stripped away. And yet my father's words do not evoke bitterness, and avoid what would be so tempting - to denounce the world and those responsible for so many lost years. There is an almost child-like quality in the writing which captivates, combining objectivity and charm. This true story tests our beliefs and signals the grave error of accepting anything for granted.

I believe that you will not fail to be moved by this book. For my part it simply reinforces the pride I hold in its author.

Robert Kaye



---

## Preface

This book was written for my grandchildren and was never intended to withstand either literary or public scrutiny.

In the first part, I tried to capture some episodes in the lives of nameless people - including my family - in a small Central European community in the early and middle part of this century. Men and women working, loving, hating, striving, hoping, dying.

I am fully aware that the chronology is at times quite haphazard and that themes overlap. I was unable, for the sake of correctness, to withhold the final conclusions and leave the lives of my characters in limbo. Some themes require a large canvas, the characters being revealed in the current of large historical events. Others require only a small canvas, with the characters being disclosed in the detail of their everyday emotions and lives.

In the second part I am grateful to G-d that I was given the privilege to live more than one life. I realise, though, that there is a price to everything. Those who live more than one life are condemned to die more than one death.

David Kaye  
Sydney  
October, 1996



---

# **Introductory Notes**

## **Pronunciation and Transliteration of Foreign Words**

### **Place Names**

English speakers have some difficulty in the pronunciation of place names on the Central European map. To assist here, the English transliteration is given in brackets at the first mention. Otherwise all place names in the text and on the map follow the original spelling. The main place names that cause an English reader difficulty are listed below, along with their transliterated equivalents:

Bacska (Bachka)

Koszeg (Kerseg)

Slochy (Sloshy)

Szombathely (Sombathhay)

Szekesfehervar (Saykeshfahirva)

Sumeg (Shumeg)

Uszok (Oozhok)

Zalaegerszeg (Zulleregerzeg)

### **Sounds**

Some Hungarian sounds present particular difficulties for the English tongue.

As a rough guide:

Hungarian *s* is pronounced like the English *sh* as in ‘shoe’.

Hungarian *sz* is pronounced like the English *s* as in ‘sit’.

Hungarian *c* is pronounced like *ts* as in ‘tsar’.

Hungarian *cs* is pronounced like the English *ch* as in ‘chase’.

Hungarian *zs* is pronounced like the French *g* as in ‘gendarme’.

---

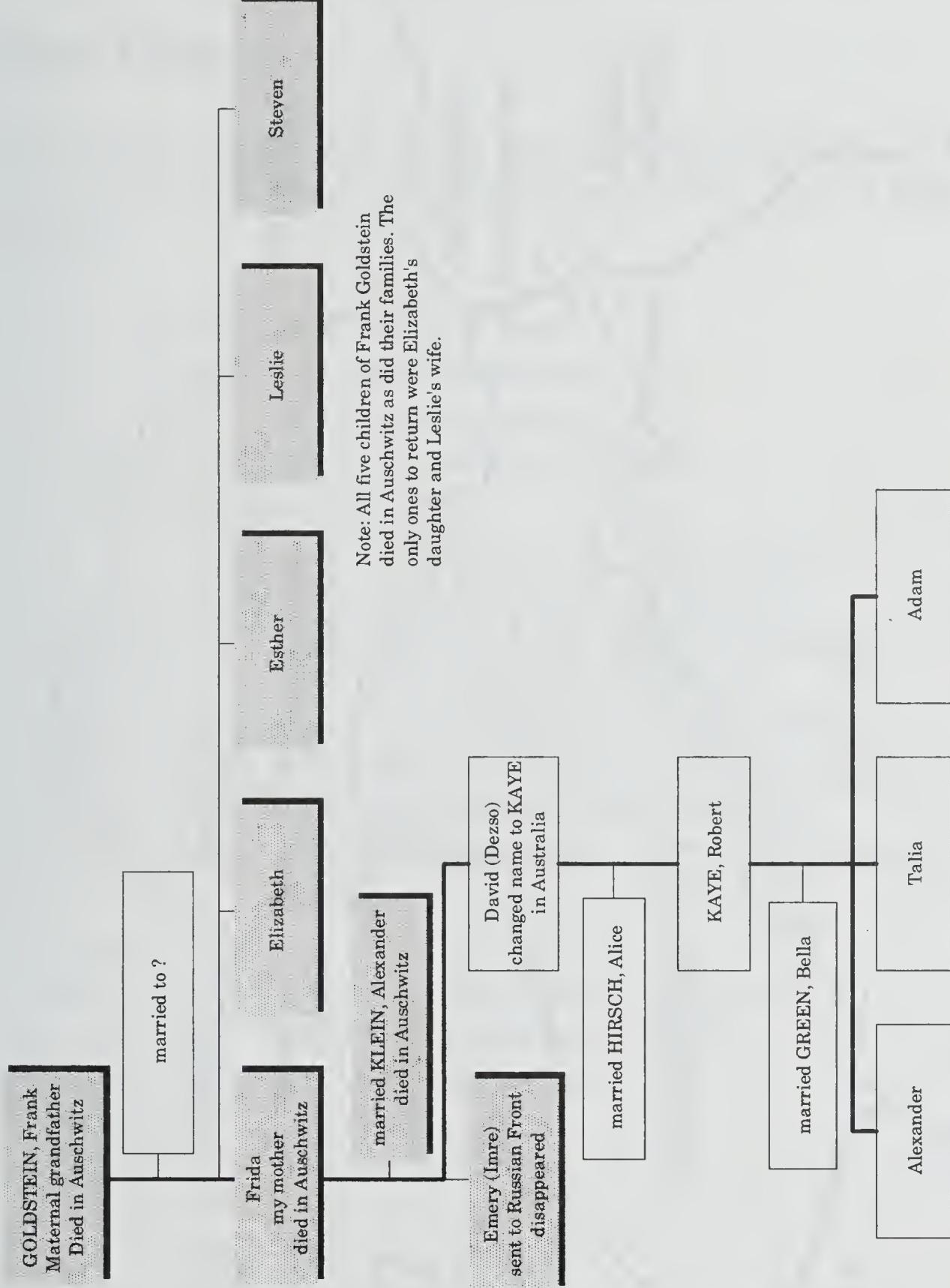
## **Names and the family tree**

The names given of people are those used by the author in his relationship with the person. Thus, for example, the author's brother Imre (in English, Emery) goes by the name with which he was familiarly known. This pattern is also followed in the family tree diagram.

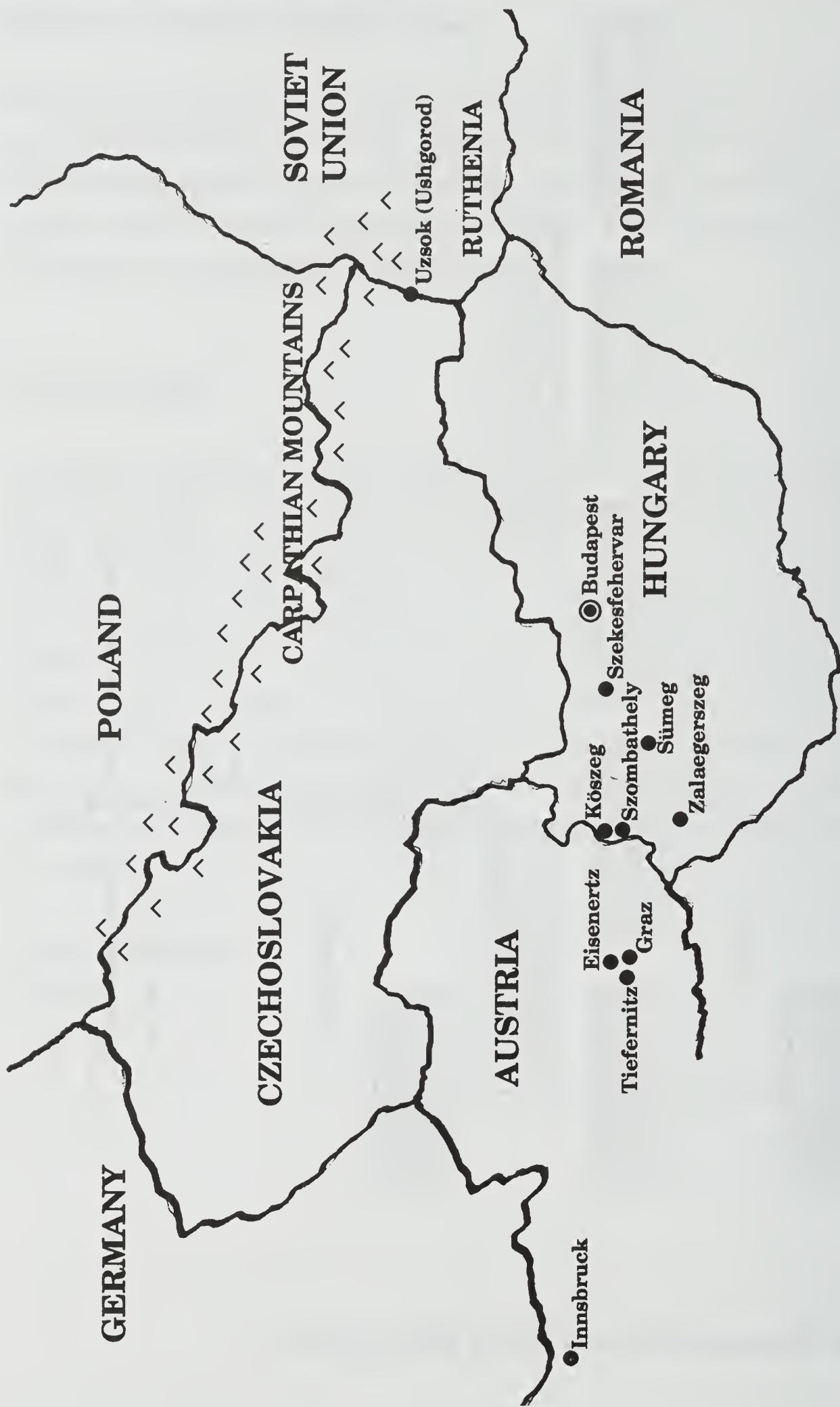
## **Chronology**

A major decision in the structure of the book is the matter of chronology: whether to follow events according to their chronological sequence or whether rather to follow the thread of the story-line, at the occasional risk of blurring the chronology. The decision was taken to follow the latter path - to be true to the story-line. To offset the risk to the chronology, a time-line is provided at the start of the book, and the reader is referred to it as a means of clarifying the sequence of events. It contains the major relevant historical events and the major personal landmarks as contained in the text.

Ruth Wajnryb  
Editor



*Five generations of David Kaye's family*



*Central and Eastern Europe, 1944*

---

## Time Line

The following time line bears the dates of historical and personal events that are mentioned in the text of this memoir.

1880	My father is born
1890	My mother is born
1912	My parents marry
3.8.1916	My brother, Imre, is born
3.8.1922	I am born
1942	Imre is called up to forced labour
1943	I am called up to forced labour
19.3.1944	The German Army enters Hungary
1.5.1944	The Sumeg ghetto is formed
May 1944	The Sumeg ghetto is liquidated
3.7.1944	My parents are deported to Auschwitz
1.4.1945	I escape from the death march
3.4.1945	The Germans carry out mass killings at Eisenertz
4.4.1945	
to 6.5.1945	I work at the farm in Tiefernitz
6.5.1945	Liberation: the war is over
June 1945	I return to Sumeg
April 1946	I leave Hungary
Sept 1947	I arrive in France
1.1.1949	I meet Alice
1.1.1950	Alice and I marry
Nov 1951	We leave France
21.1.1952	We arrive in Australia
18.9.1955	Robert is born
May 1979	I return to Europe, with Alice and Robert
24.1.1983	Grandson Alexander is born
7.10.1986	Granddaughter Talia is born
10.6.1992	Grandson Adam is born

*It is thanks to You that I enjoyed a wonderful life before, that I was spoilt, that I had lovely things, things that others do not have. G-d, bring back my parents! My poor parents. Protect them (even more than myself) so I may see them again as soon as possible. Have them come back one more time. Oh, I can say that I have had such a good mother and such a good father! I have such a faith in You that I thank you in advance.*

Liliane Gerenstein, 11 years old, in a letter scrawled to G-d before she was taken to the gas chambers.

# ► My First Life

## History and thoughts

Without anger  
Without forgetting  
Without forgiving

I want to dedicate this book to my grandchildren, Alexander, Talia and Adam. I want to tell them a story, a very simple story, a true story. I am opening a little window for them so that they can see a small section of this big world. In due course they will probably read history books, but in those books they won't find this story.

Besides, I don't trust history books. It's too easy to turn a 'patriotic organisation' into a 'terrorist', a 'freedom-fighter' into an 'insurgent'. Killing innocent civilians becomes 'retaliatory strikes' or 'punitive actions'. I don't want to shock you, or play on your sentiments. Here you'll find no heroic feats, no martyrdom. Anyway, history is overstocked with heroes and martyrs.

During this turbulent period of war-time Europe, I lived a very simple life. My aim was just to survive one more day. I made it, perhaps because I was stronger than others. Perhaps I was prepared to take more risks. Perhaps I was simply luckier. But I have been with those who didn't make it, everywhere, ever since. I have marched through the vast Russian snowfields with my brother, until I too froze. I have walked into the gas-chambers of Auschwitz with my parents, hand-in-hand. I have been in the crematorium, every day, ever since.

The first step in understanding history is to see things as

---

they are, without confusion or mystification. Simply to observe who does what to whom. It was they, the enemy, the perpetrators, who chose violence as the instrument of first resort. A soldier uses violence where a state of belligerence is recognised to exist. There was a war but we didn't understand ourselves to be at war. It was an absolute war because its goal was the complete destruction of a people. They acted in the name of a new morality which decreed the sacrifice of a people who were deemed redundant among the members of the new society.

The expression of murderous instincts was encouraged. Repression of those instincts, Freud had emphasised, is a precondition of civilisation. The enemy - that is, us - was identified. The struggle was inevitable, unending, total. The intellectual and moral confusion was very serious. People were unable to distinguish between force used to liberate and force used to enslave. Hitler told the people that under his leadership it was their destiny to be proud, strong, prosperous and at peace. And they believed him.

---

## The family

I was born in Hungary in a small country town called Sumeg (Shumeg). I imagine that if war had not forced me out of there, I would have settled into a world bounded by Lake Balaton and the nearby mountains.

My father was also born there, so I considered myself a 100% Sumegian. I was sure that - even being Jewish - nobody would ever question my identity or my allegiance. My father was born in 1880, although I always had a slight suspicion that he wasn't sure of his exact birth-date. He lost his parents at a very early age and was brought up by relatives. After he finished the compulsory six primary classes, the relatives decided it was time he earned his living. They were tailors, so it was quite logical that he carried on the family tradition. At the ripe old age of twelve, he was already working from early morning till late at night. No electricity, only a kerosene lamp. At the turn of the century, an apprentice in Eastern Europe wasn't much higher on the socio-economic ladder than a slave. His master had unrestricted licence to exploit him in return for a spartan 'full-board'. There were no social institutions or legislation to compel a boss to pay a minimum wage or to prevent wilful, corporal punishment.

This reminds me of the story about the two young apprentices peeping through the keyhole of their master's bedroom where he is making love to his wife. 'What are they doing?' asks one of the boys. 'I don't know,' replies the other, 'but it must be good, otherwise they'd make us do it'.

People had to work hard for a very simple existence. A roof over their heads, a bed and some meat on the table once a week. Food consisted mostly of bread, potatoes, beans and on special occasions, some cheap wine to wash it all down

---

with. Then again, the ozone layer was intact; they didn't worry about pollution or the population explosion.

In 1881, the population of Sumeg was 5384, of whom about 100 were Jewish families<sup>1</sup>. In 1944 it reached 5687 and 50 years later, it is still under 6000. You may recall that recently thousands of United Nations emissaries travelled to Cairo to discuss population control. They thought Egypt was the right place to hold the conference. After all, its population is growing at the rate of one million people a year. I think they should have gone to Sumeg and just asked the people how they do it.

My father had worked for twenty years when he finally decided it was time to go his own way, even if this meant giving up the relative security of his life as it was. From a friend he heard that in a nearby town<sup>2</sup>, there were some nice girls of marriageable age. It was only 60 km or a few hours' train trip from Sumeg, so off he went.

On arrival, his friend took him immediately to a family for afternoon tea. There was a young girl there, helping in the kitchen. My father looked at her and told his friend, 'She's my type'. 'Oh no,' his friend replied, 'she's too young for you. Don't forget, you're 32, and in any case, she has an older sister'. In those days, it was customary that a younger sister could not tie the knot until her older sister was married.

In due course, my father met the older sister, who was ten years younger than himself and destined to become my mother. He married her and brought her back to Sumeg with him. Back home, the relatives could never forgive

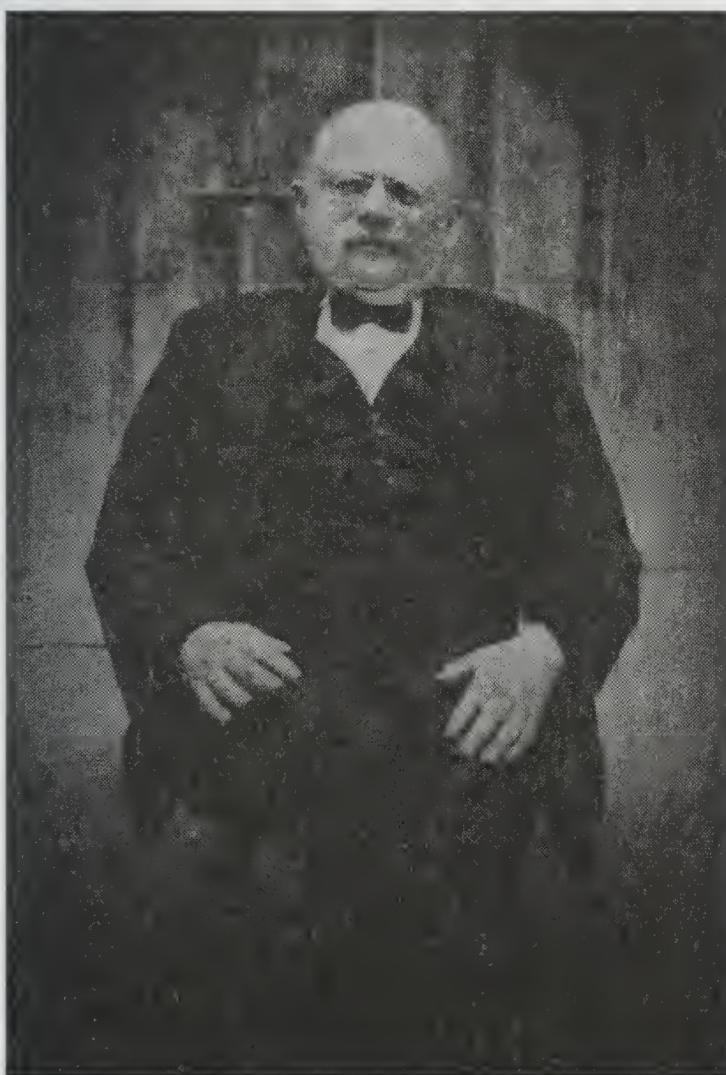
---

<sup>1</sup> Hamar, I. (Ed.) (1982). The 125th Anniversary of Sumeg's Kisfaludy Sandor Gymnasium and College. Imre Binder, Veszprem.

<sup>2</sup> The town was called Szekesfehervar (Saykeshfahirva).

---

him for the ‘selfish act’ which had deprived them of a good worker. They refused to talk to him again - a feud that lasted some 32 years, broken at last under tragic circumstances in the ghetto when they began to communicate once more.



*My maternal  
grandfather, Frank  
Goldstein*



My parents started out in the profession they knew - tailoring. My mother’s father was also a tailor, so the dynasty was continuing without a hitch. Life was a constant struggle but they never knew anything different. In those days everybody had his or her own set place in society. Very few dared upset the scales that were set at birth. If you were born a tailor, you died a tailor.

The year was 1914. Change would come from the outside.

## History and facts - World War I

On the 28th of June, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo and his murder ignited the First World War, the war that was supposed to end all wars. It came and was accepted as a kind of national fate, however deeply a part of the people would have preferred to avoid it. The minimal excitement was whipped up into patriotism. This was combined with the promise of 'home before the leaves fall'.



▲ My parents, Frida and Alexander

Austro-Hungary determined to use the occasion to absorb Serbia, just as they had absorbed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1909. The armies were ready and there was no turning back. The nation was caught in a trap, a trap set in the first 30 days of battle. It was decisive and there was no exit. Men can live for a long time without adequate food and shelter, but they cannot sustain a war of such magnitude and pain without hope. The hope was that this enormous suffering

---

would ensure an end to war for all time and the evolution of a better world.

Hearing the cry ‘Advance!’, thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, were killed to gain a few metres of ground or to swap one wet trench for another.

My father was among the first to be called up for military service. He accepted it without complaint. He had great respect for the law of his country and he believed in the judgement of his superiors. Nevertheless, it was hard to say good-bye to his young wife, especially as she was expecting a child, my brother Imre. As he left, he said, ‘I’ll be back before the leaves fall’, repeating what the propaganda machines echoed all over the country. It took him four autumns to make good his promise. It must have been hard for him, but it was not less so for my mother to look after a baby and at the same time eke out a living.

As the war progressed, the list of goods in short supply became longer and longer. My father was sent to the Eastern Front, fighting in Romania and later in Italy. I remember him in subsequent years as a very entertaining raconteur. He told us the same adventures and exploits repeatedly, and we listened wide-eyed to his stories. That we already knew all the details was beside the point. For us he was the greatest hero and the fact that the war was lost was everybody else’s fault, all those who let him down.

## A mission

The turning point of his military career occurred towards the end of the war. A volunteer was needed to deliver an important message to an isolated Hungarian unit, separated by the enemy line. There was no telephone and of course, fax belonged to the realm of science fiction. My father was keen to volunteer for the mission, not only out of patriotism, but also the promise of a two-week holiday to see his family. He would have done anything to see his young wife again and to meet his son.

The mental preparation for the mission was very intensive. He had to repeat over and over the route he had to take to avoid the Italian trenches. In case of capture, he was not allowed to disclose anything that might benefit the enemy. There was to be no co-operation, not even under duress or torture. He had to move at night and come back the following night. This didn't bother him because he was trained for orientation by the stars. There was one little problem - there were no stars that night.

Nonetheless, his eyes slowly accustomed to the darkness. Around him, everything was quiet. He gave the sentry the password and off he went. The night was very peaceful, almost as though the war had taken a holiday. It was so unreal: people in front of him and behind him, all asleep now and who at first light would start again to shoot at each other. He felt sorry for them. He had been in the army for four years at that stage but they had still not succeeded in planting the seed of hatred in his heart. For the moment he was happy with his lot and his thoughts were on home and seeing his little family.

As he progressed, he was supposed to find a tree at which place he had to take a turn to the right to reach his

---

destination. He was unable to find the tree, but he was sufficiently prepared for the task to recognise which path to take. The road took him along seemingly abandoned trenches. Suddenly he heard some voices and as he edged closer, he realised he could not understand the language being spoken. Decisively, following his training, he jumped into the trench so as to be out of the firing line and waited for an opportunity to make the next step.

Obviously, he was at the Italian lines. He didn't have to wait long. Suddenly, two powerful arms grabbed him and lifted him effortlessly out of the trench. He couldn't do anything but kick violently but his adversary didn't seem to take any notice. The bearded Italian who held him was over six feet tall and powerfully built. Next to him, my father looked like a schoolboy, although he too was very muscular. The Italian talked to him expansively, using his hands to make himself understood, but to no avail. After a long tirade, he realised that his prisoner couldn't understand Italian. He switched to broken German. As German was the second language in Hungary, my father while lacking fluency was happy to be able to communicate.

The Italian soldier explained to him that they were both in luck - my father because the war was over (even if lost) and he, Luigi, because he could expect a medal for bravery. My father would have liked to sit down with him and chat about his family in Sumeg. Under those circumstances, how could he explain in the middle of the night to his Italian captor that unless he delivered an important message, he wouldn't get to see his family, reunite with his wife, meet his little boy?

The Italian soldier must have noticed the sadness on my father's face because he put his arm around his shoulder and led him towards a house. On the way they passed a sentry. The two Italians started to talk to each other and they shook each other's hands vigorously. The sentry also

---

shook my father's hand in an obvious gesture of welcome. The door opened and they entered what was clearly a military headquarters, the place being full of soldiers of different rank.

Luigi talked to one of the officers who called for silence in the room. As they were talking, they pointed several times in my father's direction. He became the centre of attention and probably for the first time in his life, a very important person. One of the soldiers produced a bottle of red wine, had a sip from it first, than handed it over to my father. He too took a drink and then passed the bottle down the line. His friend Luigi bade him '*arrivederci*', and wishing him good luck, he left.

After a couple of days my father was transferred to a P.O.W. camp. As he was waiting at the train station in the company of a few other prisoners who were surrounded by guards, a group of Italian soldiers passed by. Suddenly, one of them broke rank, ran to him, embracing him in a gigantic bear-hug and kissing him on his forehead. It was Luigi, his captor, with a freshly trimmed beard. With great excitement, he tried to explain in his broken German that because of my father, he'd got two weeks' holiday to see his folks. As they were boarding the train, my father was thinking about his own family. He felt he had let them down. As the train pulled out of the station, he heard a distant call - '*arrivederci!*'.

---

## Between the wars

World War I ended. Millions of displaced persons were on the move to reach home, not knowing what they were going to find there. The roads were inundated by people going in every direction using every conceivable kind of transportation. My father didn't return empty-handed. On the road he found a little lamb, probably orphaned, and brought it home for his son. He gave the lamb the name of Samu (Sam in English). For Imre and Sam it was love at first sight. Imre became Sam's master and there was nowhere he went without the devoted lamb following behind him.

One day, my brother fell very ill. All the proven medications of the day were tried on him - bicarbonate of soda, camomille tea, even chicken broth - these being the early forerunners of penicillin. In those days, social institutions that we today take for granted (health care, Medicare etc.) were non-existent. There were two or three doctors in the town, as well as a hospital which was strategically located next to the cemetery. People didn't go to the doctor for a check-up. Instead, the doctor came to the home of the patient if it was warranted. The hospital was used mostly for infectious diseases. Babies were born at home, aided by midwives.

When my brother's condition deteriorated, my parents called the doctor. His name was Gross, a short man with a protruding belly. He examined Imre and after putting the blanket carefully back on him, he sat down. (In those days, doctors were in no hurry). Then he asked my parents: 'Is there a pet in the house?'. They responded with a nod. 'Get rid of it', he ordered and then left. Next morning Sam didn't come in the kitchen to his favourite corner. Nobody talked about it, nobody dared ask any questions. My father tried unsuccessfully to camouflage his guilt under a poker face. Sam disappeared and Imre got well.

---

I was born in 1922, the same month and same day as my brother, six years apart. We often made jokes about it, saying that it was all a big conspiracy so as to make only one birthday cake for the two of us. The primary school years passed uneventfully. Neither of us realised how hard our parents had to work to make ends meet. My mother was the organiser and was extremely resourceful. My father worked hard, accepting life as it was, unchanging and unchangeable. No complaints were voiced, no questions asked. His amusements were the usual snooker game on Saturday afternoon and smoking two cigarettes after dinner. Thinking back, I realise that it wasn't health considerations that made him restrict his smoking to two cigarettes a day. In those days we didn't know about the harmful effects of smoking. He did it strictly for economic reasons. Granted, the temptation to smoke more was tempered somewhat by only being able to buy cigarettes singly. I remember crossing the road every day to fetch him two 'King'<sup>3</sup> cigarettes.

Needless to say, my parents never went on a holiday. They were very poor. There were no apartment buildings in Sumeg and we could never have afforded our own house. We rented one part of a building, where the owner (a distant relative on my mother's side) lived in the front section. There was no running water, hot or cold. The toilet was outside at the back of the courtyard and to avoid overflowing, it had to be emptied from time to time. I can't tell you how this was done or who performed the important function. This was one of those subjects that was not talked about and in any case, I gather it happened in the middle of the night.

Water was supplied by deep wells. Luckily, we had one very close to our house, in fact just across the road, in a little park. We used to have great fun throwing rocks down the

---

<sup>3</sup> This was a brand name.

---

well, watching with fascination as they disappeared or disintegrated on hitting the water. Every now and then the village had a fatality when a child would fall down the well and drown.

We had no bathroom. On the day we decided to take a bath (which was not very often!) we had to fetch the water in buckets and warm it on the fireplace. We placed a large metal container in the kitchen and there performed our ablutions with the same water, first the children and afterwards, the parents.

Healthy drinking water was always in short supply and this was probably one of the reasons we often suffered contagious maladies, which themselves greatly influenced the ‘natural’ population control. I remember a typhoid epidemic during which my brother also contracted the sickness. Children were dying around us daily, while the doctors looked on helplessly. Imre’s throat was completely blocked and he could barely breathe. In desperation, my mother wrapped a handkerchief around her index finger. She reached down his throat and cleared the passage-way. You might well say that this wasn’t the most advanced method of curing typhoid, but the proof of the pie is in the eating. Imre recovered!

The decade of the twenties passed in relative tranquillity. Not much was happening that was earth shattering; and in the absence of television, computers and the information super-highway, we still received news on horseback. In contrast, today, we have plenty of information, but not enough time. The mass of available knowledge has grown in formidable leaps. Increased production of books, coupled with the tendency towards specialisation, has brought us to an intellectual impasse. We know more and more about less and less. Where will we end up? Knowing everything about nothing? We are already suffering from the effects of undigested information.

---

## Imre

My brother and I had a very special relationship. The difference in age meant there was no jealousy or sibling rivalry between us. I was his little brother and he looked after me. I admired him, his handsome looks, his skills on the soccer field.

There were two sides to Imre's personality. At home he was the best child any parents could wish for. At school he was uncontrollable.



*My brother  
Imre, 1939*

---

In those days corporal punishment was not uncommon in schools. Mr. Hensch, the German teacher, greatly enjoyed walking between the rows of pupils and hitting the children with his short stick, left and right, anyone whom he thought did not offer up the desired degree of attention. One day it was my brother's turn to get a share of the hated stick. He considered the attack unjustified. He stood up, walked out of the classroom and slammed the door so hard that the lock broke. A locksmith had to be called to let the class out. Today, this behaviour may not seem so serious, but you have to remember that then military-style discipline began in the school system, long before the army.

The punishment was immediate expulsion. My parents were desperate. How could law-abiding citizens accept shame like this? We all looked to mother to come up with a solution and we were not disappointed. Knowing Hensch's gastronomical soft spots, and summoning vast reserves of diplomacy, she took some goose liver and a bottle of good wine to him and begged him to forgive and forget. After the second glass of wine he promised to give my brother a second chance. The mission would have been a complete success if Imre hadn't encountered him the next day and reminded him in a rather unorthodox fashion of his dislike of him. As Mr. Hensch was strolling along with his female companion in his Sunday best, my brother went right up to him and spat in his face.

Suffice it to say that this was the end of Imre's academic career in that school. My parents did not reproach him, but rather blamed Hensch - after all, 'what can you expect from an anti-Semite?'. For a while, my brother stayed at home helping father, enjoying his bike, his soccer game and girls, not necessarily in that order.

One day a traveller came into our shop to sell some cloth. He noticed my brother working on the sewing machine and

---

---

called my father aside. 'You are making a big mistake, Mr. Klein, keeping your son here'. 'What can I do?', asked my father. 'Let him go. He needs space. I can get him a position in Budapest'. My parents were heartbroken, but they finally agreed that he must be given a chance - 'he was too good to stay in Sumeg'.

He was found a position in Budapest in one of the biggest firms in the country. Within two weeks, he was their Number 1 salesman and he asked for an appointment with the boss. He demanded an increase in his salary, arguing his case that the profits he was bringing in for the firm



*Imre and Magda's  
wedding*

---

would well support it. He had asked for an impossibly high amount ... and he got it! Imre worked there very happily and he spent his holidays with us back at home. His appearance was impeccable and later we found out that in his spare time he worked as a male model. We were very proud of him.

At the age of 21 he was called up into the army to do the two years of compulsory military service, which he did in 1937-8. Imre turned out to be a model soldier as well. At that time, there was no official discrimination between Jews and Gentiles who served together, other than the odd sarcastic remark, like 'try to be as good as this Jewish boy'<sup>4</sup>. After his military service, Imre got married. His wife, Magda, was a wonderful girl whom we immediately accepted into our close family.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jews were not considered good military material.

## Operation Barbarossa

At 15 minutes after four o'clock in the morning of 22 June, 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union began. In its first hours, German bombers struck at 66 Soviet aerodromes, destroying many of their aircraft on the ground. At the same time five selected Soviet cities were subjected to aerial bombardment. Then, as Soviet citizens woke up to the screech of bombs, the German Army began its advance along a 930-mile front.

June 21st was the shortest night of the year. It was also one year to the day since the French surrendered to the Germans at Compiègne. On that same day, 129 years earlier, Napoleon had crossed the river Neman in his own search for victory in Moscow. At 7 o'clock in the morning of 21 June, 1941, a proclamation by Hitler was read over the radio by Goebbels: 'I have decided to place the fate and future of the Reich and our people in the hands of our soldiers'. Within the first few days of the German assault, it was clear that this would not be a war limited to the battles of armies. The German Army conducted the war in an irresponsible, senseless and criminal manner. When in the bunkers around the frontier village of Slochy (Sloshy), they finally overran the Russian defenders, they burned down the village and murdered all its inhabitants.

Hungary's policies before and during the war can best be understood in the light of her revanchist goals<sup>5</sup>. In November 1938 Hungary had joined Germany in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, annexing some Slovokian districts and a part of sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. In March 1939, when Slovakia declared itself an

---

<sup>5</sup> That is, a policy of revenge directed towards the recovery of territory lost to an enemy.

---

independent state, Hungary occupied the rest of Ruthenia. In August 1940, Hungary received Transylvania from Romania under the Vienna Award - a reward from Hitler for joining the Axis powers. (Hungary joined the Tripartite Pact on the 20 Nov, 1940). In April 1941 Hungary occupied the Bacska (Bachka) Basin in north-eastern Yugoslavia. In June 1941 Hungarian forces joined the Germans in invading Russia, although Hungarian military participation was less than wholehearted, with Regent Nicholas Horthy resisting the German demand for a general mobilisation.

Hungarian preoccupation with the traditional enemy, Romania, combined with mounting losses on the Russian front necessitated a scapegoat. No-one fitted this role better than the Jews. Hungary had traditionally been fertile soil for anti-Semitism and so it did not take long to espouse Goebbel's propaganda: 'The Jews started the war and the only way to attain peace is to eliminate them'. From 1941, anti-Jewish legislation and various restrictions imposed on Jews started to appear in the papers and on the billboards. Because the Jews were 'with the enemy', they were not to be trusted to serve in the army. As they had to earn their keep, they had to work in forced labour camps.

## Imre's call-up to forced labour

Imre was among the first to be called up, in the summer of 1942. He came to Sumeg to see us and to say good-bye. He didn't want us to go with him to the station. He asked us to look after his wife who was expecting a baby, just as our mother had been expecting him when our father left in the call-up to World War I. As it turned out, there was one crucial difference: Imre was taken to the Russian Front and he never saw his child.

As the Russian winter approached, Germany's military position began to deteriorate. Despite this, the top priority given to the Final Solution remained unchanged. German troops besieging Stalingrad had been encircled by the Red Army. Behind the front, rational considerations with regard to the war economy demanded the use of all available hands to produce armaments and provide essential services to the army. So the elimination of the Jews had to be harmonised with the necessities of the war economy.

My brother's group was used to transport ammunition to the front line on their backs and to clear mine-fields with their bare hands. The guards had a quota to fill - they had to kill a certain number of people each day. So, if, for example, a mine exploded while being recovered, it made their work easier. After a long day of back-breaking work, they were given some food - just enough to prolong their existence for one more day.

This, however, was not always enough to satisfy the tormentors, who also wanted some amusement. They would herd their defenceless captives at gunpoint to the edge of the forest in the freezing cold where they told them they were going to the circus. They forced them to climb up trees and shout 'I am a dirty Jew'. Those who did not shout to their liking were used for target practice.

---

Those too sick to be able to work were taken to an area called the ‘hospital’. This was a clearance behind the barracks where the sick were laid down in the snow. With temperatures dropping to 20 or 30 degrees below zero, the elements quickly complemented the job of the Master Race. As the Red Army approached, the rate of killings had to be increased. The reward for killing an extra Jew was an extra packet of cigarettes. This was a great incentive and by the time the Russians broke through the lines, only a handful of Jews remained alive. My brother was among them. As the Germans were fleeing, these boys decided to go over to the Russians. But Imre didn’t go with them, stating that he wanted to go home to see his wife and baby. He disappeared without a trace.

## **Crime and punishment. Justice?**

When the war ended, those Jewish boys came back from Russia and told their stories. They located the commander of their group and a few of the guards responsible for the atrocities. The criminals were put on trial. My sister-in-law obtained a special pass for the hearings and she insisted that I accompany her.

When someone kills a man, he is put in prison. When someone kills twenty people, he is declared mentally ill. But what can you do when someone kills a hundred or a thousand people? Some of the victims suffered a kind of battle fatigue and wanted only to put it all behind them. Others thought that the authorities in particular ought to be held responsible for their actions. Some talked of reconciliation in the place of revenge. But why should a mother reconcile herself with the monster who killed her child, or a wife with the person who killed her husband?

The proceedings took exhaustive testimony and the crimes were thoroughly documented. The trials set a tone of official moral condemnation. I remember the near-sighted balding man in his grubby prison uniform sitting in the box - a man who if only for a short while tried to play God, deciding who would live and who would die. I listened to witnesses whose words, silences and tears contained the tormented memory of an entire people. I watched the defendants, anxious to find out for myself whether there was any humanity in them. I was hoping to see a monster whose terrible crimes were clearly legible on his distorted face. I was disappointed. They seemed quite normal, like any other men, cool, clear expressions - even able to smile when the circumstances were favourable. After all, they were only soldiers 'following orders', even if some of the young and overly dedicated went somewhat overboard with

---

enthusiasm for their job. But how could they justify what was done to those young boys? The evidence of the crimes was beyond dispute. The verdict was 'guilty as charged', death by hanging with no appeal.

The executions were public and took place on a sports ground. My sister-in-law would not have missed the event and she arrived early to secure good seats for both of us. The executioner was a well-known man by the name of Bogar, who as a public servant served the government of the day loyally. The ground filled up fast and the first criminal was called. Escorted between two policemen, he walked to the gallows. He said something to the policeman, or maybe just his lips were moving. The crowd started shouting 's-l-o-w-l-y, B-o-g-a-r'. I felt sick and excusing myself went out. When it was all over, I met my sister-in-law at the exit. She had been so absorbed in the spectacle that she had hardly noticed my absence. She didn't display bitterness any more. The chapter was closed, although she was still hoping for a miracle - that somehow my brother would reappear. She waited for five years and then remarried so that her daughter, Susie, would have a father.

## Life at home

In 1942 the way of life in our little town had not changed greatly. We heard rumours about atrocities in far-away places but we believed that it could not happen in Sumeg. The fact was that there was not a great deal of love lost between an assimilated Hungarian Jew and a so-called 'Galicianer'<sup>6</sup>. After all, such people dressed in traditional garb, ate and behaved differently to the local population, and spoke Yiddish instead of their country's language. We refused to believe that in our enemy's eyes we were reduced to the common denominator of 'Jew'. In addition, we regarded the Jewish problem from an economic perspective, believing the Nazis were after the rich Jews, and hence taking comfort in the fact that they could get nothing from us. In a strange way, we felt rather cosy in our poverty.

Education was expensive and I knew it was a serious burden on the very limited resources of my parents. There was no point in continuing my schooling. I stopped my high school studies at the age of 17 and started to learn tailoring. In a way, I enjoyed this period of my life - hardly any responsibility and I felt good in the company of my parents. I had a few friends and on week-ends we used to visit the girls in the neighbouring town. Some evenings during the week I went with my parents to see their friends.

There is one picture that is very deeply embedded in my memory. It was winter and the snow was firm on the ground and it squeaked as it gave way to our footsteps. I walked next to my father who was holding my hand in his pocket to keep it warm. My mother was following us, carefully stepping in our footsteps. There was nobody on the street. Everything was quiet, peaceful, almost unreal. Occasionally we heard a dog barking, but even this was a sign more of a greeting than a menace. I wished this time would last for

---

<sup>6</sup> This was a derogatory term for Orthodox Hassidic Jews.

---

ever. Associating daylight with war, I didn't want the morning to come.

Our friends were happy to see us, offering coffee and home-made biscuits. They had two boys of around my age and a daughter a couple of years older. She had a pleasant face and an already well-developed body. While our parents were discussing the latest news from the front, we children played cards. I tried to seat myself next to Vera. During the game, I dropped my hand casually on her lap, watching her reaction from the corner of my eye. When she showed no sign of minding, I was ready for a more daring exploit. I put my hand under her skirt! I had the impression she enjoyed it but I knew I couldn't go any further. At that time we didn't have sex education at school. Yet somehow we succeeded in picking up what was needed, usually from prostitutes or from servants coming from the country to work as domestics.

I knew that I had reached my limit with Vera, even were she a willing partner. But I didn't know that my respect for her wasn't shared by everybody else. One day my parents told me that Vera had gone away to visit some relatives in another town. This was rather strange because holidays were the last thing on people's mind at that time. The news from the front was not encouraging. New, restrictive measures had been introduced against the Jewish population. Even so, we were so occupied with daily life issues that we failed to recognise that the goal was to transform traditional anti-Semitism into a literal annihilation.

A few months later, Vera came back with a little baby boy. Nobody knew who the father was and from one day to the next, she became an outcast. Although she continued living with her parents, her father could never forgive her 'mistake'. He never accepted the child and refused to be his grandfather.

---

## The final journey

We Jews who survived the Holocaust are often obliged to answer questions from our fellow Jews: 'Why did you not fight back?' 'How could you go like lambs to the slaughter?'. What people often don't realise was that the process was gradual. We were a civilian population dispersed among the nations of the world. We had no country, no political or military power. Also, one has to understand the three historical stages following the Nazis rise to power. The first phase was the dis-emancipation (or reverse emancipation) of the Jews from the State apparatus and from society's cultural and educational institutions. This in itself was not unbearable because the majority of Jews anyway were occupied in commerce and industry. Then came the stage of identification or branding - compulsory wearing of the yellow star. This was humiliating and regarded as regressive (a return to the dark days of the Middle Ages), but even this we didn't take too seriously - after all, in our little town everybody knew who was a Jew and who was a Gentile. Then came the establishment of the ghetto and this was regarded as a provisional measure. We didn't recognise that by this time we were completely at their mercy, unable to escape our fate.

When the ghetto was liquidated, everything happened very fast. One morning, in May 1944 the ghetto was surrounded by gendarmes<sup>7</sup>. Then came the order to line up, ready to go to the railway station. People were to bring only the bare necessities. It was a pitiful sight, mostly women with young children and elderly men because the young able-bodied men had already been taken away to forced labour camps. The town's people came out from their houses to watch - some were simply curious; some were smiling; a few were shouting abuse.

<sup>7</sup> functioning as police.

---

When they arrived at the station, the wagons were already waiting. The gendarmes squeezed as many people in as was possible. Then they handed over a bucket (to be used as a toilet) and closed the doors. The train started to move slowly, gradually picking up speed, effortlessly taking its human cargo to the unknown. People were sitting on their knapsacks, holding their small children on their laps, tossing, turning, pushing to find some *lebensraum* (freely translated, elbow-room). They didn't know how long they travelled, losing their sense of time in the semi-darkness of the crowded, smelly wagon.

Vera along with her family was in one of the carriages. Suddenly she had to relieve herself and started to move in the direction of the back of the wagon. She realised that she wouldn't make it through the crowd with the child in her arms. She turned back and with great determination, put the baby in her father's lap. When she returned, the child was still sitting there, her father's two arms protectively wrapped around him. The old man was leaning his face on the baby's head, wetting his hair with his tears. 'Papa, don't cry', said the little boy. 'I'm not crying', he answered. 'Papa, where are we going?'. 'We're going to heaven'. 'I don't want to go to heaven, I want to go home'.

Eventually, the train came to a halt and finally the doors opened. Strange-looking creatures in striped uniforms were shouting instructions to disembark quickly. Further up, soldiers with machine guns, holding barking, ferocious-looking dogs, surrounded the crowd. Men and women were separated. They had to line up five to a row. The people were moving forward. Some were sent to the left, some to the right. Vera was carrying the child, with her mother close, next to her. They reached the front row where a German officer was standing. With a quick glance at the person in front of him, he would give the instruction to go 'left' or 'right'. He was exceptionally good looking. He

---

---

ordered Vera to hand the child to her mother who was sent to the left, and then told her to go to the right. ‘Please’, she asked him, ‘let me stay with my child, he can’t go to sleep without me’. The soldier near the officer lifted his stick ready to punish her for talking to the officer, but the latter gave a sign to stop. ‘In this case you can all go to the left’, he said with a smile. *‘Danke schon’* (thank you), said Vera, but the officer paid no attention. He was too busy selecting the next row. Vera didn’t know that she would pay with her life for the choice of staying with her child. They all disappeared behind the barbed wire. The dogs stopped barking<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Among the transports that terminated at Auschwitz were my mother and father. A witness to Vera’s fate and others’ was a niece of mine, who survived and related these events to me in 1945.

## The ghetto<sup>9</sup>

Conventional wisdom tells us that the history of the past provides guidance for the future but Edmund Burke was closer to the truth when he wrote that ‘you can never plan the future by the past’. The long Jewish history of persecution offered little that was instructive or relevant in the confrontation of the Final Solution. This was a new phenomenon in the record of human history.

Ever since the war I have tried to reconstruct the events of the past so as to find out what really happened to my parents during my absence in the years 1943-44. I collected information from witnesses who lived through this tragic period. Each time I tried to find the truth yet each time fragments formed a new picture. Yet they were always the same fragments. My quest always seems to be just outside my grasp.

Being a parent myself I can understand how my parents must have felt with their children taken away to the unknown. Every day new restrictions came into effect. Then businesses and homes had to be closed down and all the Jews had to move into designated houses surrounding the synagogue. Jews could not leave the ghetto after 6 p.m. All valuables, jewellery, watches, bicycles, etc. had to be deposited in the town-hall for ‘registration’. The warning was always the same: severe punishment for those caught hiding anything.

---

<sup>9</sup> The ghetto, of course, was created for the express purpose of congregating large numbers of Jews in the one relatively confined place so as to facilitate deportation to the extermination camps, as part of the Final Solution. This memoir does not follow a chronological path (e.g. by first mentioning ghettos, then the camps), but rather chooses to consolidate various story-lines that run through the work. The reader who is perhaps in need of a stricter sequence of events than the narrative itself provides, might be assisted by consulting the time-line at the start of the memoir.

---

In spite of all the hardships, they got used to the situation fairly quickly. After all, they reasoned at first, they were still 'at home'. My mother was very innovative in providing the necessary food; my father sewed and repaired clothes, getting ready for winter. When the order came to display the yellow star, he placed it next to his service medal from World War I. He wore his medals with great pride, although hardly anybody noticed them.

## **My father and Steven Horvath**

Then one day something happened, a relatively small incident that changed forever his attitude towards life. In the ghetto there were four to five families to a house, and one day they ran out of milk. My father was prepared to fetch some - after all, he had many friends he could count on among the locals. It was 5.45 pm, close to the curfew. It didn't take long to have the container filled and he made his way back to the ghetto.

He met two gendarmes patrolling the road. They had already passed him when they turned, one of them yelling after him: 'hey you, come here!'. My father obeyed. 'What have you got there?' 'Milk... for the children', he answered. 'Give it to me!'. He took the container, smelled it, then went to the gutter and poured it out. 'What time is it, Jew?', the gendarme asked my father without raising his voice. 'I don't know. I haven't got a watch. It had to be taken to the town hall to be registered', answered my father. The gendarme handed back the container and said, 'very well, let's go to the police station'.

It was only a short distance. Entering, they passed through a long corridor leading to a large room at the end. The door was open and an officer was sitting behind the desk. One of the gendarmes went in, telling his fellow to stay outside with my father. He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but after a few minutes the gendarme came to the door and told his mate, 'bring him in'.

My father didn't know the officer. He wasn't a local, probably transferred from another town. He was absorbed in reading some documents, hardly looking up at the person in front of him. 'So you broke the curfew.... why?'. He was talking to my father while at the same time keenly absorbed in the

---

papers in front of him. ‘I wanted to fetch some milk for the children’. At this point the officer looked up at him. ‘What are those medals?’, he asked. My father told him that he acquired them by serving on the Romanian and the Italian fronts in the 1914-18 war. The gendarme, who hadn’t spoken till now, turned to him and asked, ‘how did you get them? How much did you pay for them?’. ‘I don’t understand’, replied my father. ‘You don’t understand?’, he repeated in mockery, and with a sudden movement he grabbed the two medals to rip them off. They were securely attached to the jacket and in the process of trying to remove them, he tore the material yet failed to release the medals.

‘Wait’, the officer told his subordinate, ‘carry on with the patrol. I’ll handle this case myself’. The two gendarmes saluted him, clicked their heels in unison, and left. ‘You mentioned you served in Italy. Where in Italy?’. ‘At the Piave, Second Infantry’. ‘Who was the officer in charge?’.  
‘Captain Kalman’, replied my father. The officer walked slowly to the other side of the room, pulled out a chair and closed the door. He took out a wooden box and offered my father a cigarette. He held his own cigarette to light the one my father took. ‘I am sorry for this’, he said, pointing to the medals which were hanging dejectedly upside down. ‘We were at the same place in Italy’, he told my father. Then they started to talk about the war of 1914-18, the war that was supposed to end all wars.

My father began to get restless, knowing that my mother and the other friends in the ghetto would be anxiously awaiting his return. He stood up, ready to leave, but the officer told him to wait a minute. He took the milk container and went into another room. When he returned he handed it back, apologising that this was all the milk he had. He put his arm on my father’s shoulder and asked his name. ‘Alexander Klein’. ‘My name is Steven Horvath. If we happen to live through this war, don’t forget my name and put in a good word for me’, he said to my father. They shook

---

hands and walked towards the door. There, before opening the door, he rearranged his uniform and called out ‘Joe’. A young policeman appeared. ‘Take this man to the ghetto. He did some work for me’.

My father arrived home, emotionally exhausted. People looked at his torn medals, like two dead birds on a broken branch. No-one asked any questions. My father never recovered from the incident. He withdrew in himself and hardly ever talked to other people, except my mother. Something had broken inside him, something irreparable. He never wore his medals again. At the end of June, the population of the ghetto was moved from Sumeg to Zalaegerszeg (Zulleregerzeg), and then, on 3rd July 1944, to Auschwitz. That was the period when the crematoria were working at full capacity. For Hungarian Jews from outside the capital, Budapest, the Final Solution was complete.

When in May 1945 the fighting stopped and I returned to Sumeg, an elderly lady came to see me. She was the wife of Steven Horvath, the former Police Chief. With tears in her eyes, she told me that her husband had been arrested for war crimes, crimes against humanity. He had sent her a note from jail, asking her to find out if any of my family was alive and ‘through our connection’ to help him out of prison. I promised her I would do my best and I had difficulty stopping her from kissing my hand.

The Secretary of the Party was a family friend and I didn’t waste any time seeing him. He was happy to meet with me. After a short discussion I told him about Horvath and the purpose of my visit. As I progressed with my presentation, I noticed the smile on his face gradually freeze, but he continued to listen to me without interruption. Then speaking very deliberately, he told me that Horvath had been arrested not because he was good to my father but because of his role in the suffering of hundreds and

---

thousands of people. He brought to my attention the fact that he, as the Secretary of the Party, was building a new society where the likes of Horvath have no place. He also said that he was not going to be side-tracked by me or anybody else. Then he stood up and put his arm on my shoulder as he led me to the door. When he opened it, he told me to let him know if anybody else from my family returned. I never saw the Horvaths again. I heard that he was given a seven-year prison sentence and was released by amnesty after two years.

## The labour camp

No, there was nowhere like home. Nowhere could you find such a comfortable bed, such a sweet little room, still dark in the morning although the sunlight was already beating against the shutters. It was Sunday and I felt that I had all the time in the world to laze about. Waking up from a good long sleep, to a good long life, with a delicious yawn, a stretch, then another stretch, clenching my fist tightly above my head. It was a sinfully luxurious life, one to be enjoyed but not one you could boast about to your friends. We had a lot of problems but it was a good life. There was an indefinable pleasure, peculiar to the place, that only you and the members of your family could appreciate, and your friends could never share.

My father had a winter coat, knee-length with a very large fur collar. On cold winter nights, he put it over the top of my blanket, and the fur touching my face gave me a feeling of warmth and security. Autumn wasn't very far off, the air was crisp and pleasantly cool. Then I heard a cough from a short distance away, followed by a knock on the outside door. My mother answered with a 'yes' confirming and acknowledging the knocking, but at the same time, with a question-mark and a note of anxiety in her voice.

'Good morning, Mrs. Klein'. 'Good morning, Mr. Zold'. Zold was the local policeman, a very popular and likeable fellow whom we used to call 'Uncle Zold'. My mother asked him to sit down and listening from my room I could hear that he complied because the chair squeaked under his heavy frame. 'Coffee?', asked my mother. 'No, thanks, I've already had breakfast'. 'A glass of good wine?'. 'I never say "no" to wine'. After tasting it, he told my mother that he brought some papers to be signed. 'No, not by you, by your son'. The conversation stopped for a while, then my mother walked

---

to my room and opening the door slightly, she told me to get dressed and come out.

My call-up notice to the forced labour camp came as no surprise. After all, we knew that at the age of 21 everyone has to do two years of military service, and I couldn't expect to be treated differently. What I didn't know was that this two years would change my life forever. I was given three days which was just enough for my parents to prepare my backpack. Mother baked some cake, assuring me that it wouldn't go bad even after a couple of weeks. Father brought out his winter coat and told me to take it, saying that it may prove very useful in the coming winter. I knew that he meant the 'Russian' winter. I didn't want to accept it, knowing how attached he was to the coat, but he was deaf to my arguments. With heavy heart, I left my parents' home and never saw them again.

I had to travel to Koszeg (Kerseg) and announce my arrival at a military compound. It was a medium-size country town, close to the Austrian border, with a very pronounced ethnic German population. The big hall was quickly filling up with new arrivals. Smiling, friendly faces, all the same age, ready for the adventure. Our living quarters were like any other military barrack - there were no beds; instead we were given some straw which we covered with our blankets. We were placed in alphabetical order, so next to me was another Klein, Ernest Klein. He was over six feet tall, powerfully built, without any Jewish characteristics. Rough, tough and uneducated. He didn't waste any time showing me the knife-wounds and bruises he had acquired in street-fights. He had lost his parents at an early age, and was brought up by his two sisters. He worked as a messenger boy, using a push-bike. We became instant friends and he told me that if I ever had any problem with anybody, just to let him know and he would fix it. I knew exactly what he meant. Being the tallest, he was always in the first row and insisted that I should be next to him. As my height might be

---

considered medium at best, we looked rather odd, standing together in the first row. But no-one dared comment, let alone poke fun.

The drill was a typically military one, except that the Jews were not given rifles. In addition, we were kept in separate quarters from the Gentiles and our conditions of life were worse. We were guarded by military personnel most of whom had returned from the Russian front where they had participated in a great deal of cruelty. We furnished them with an excellent opportunity to indulge further their sadistic appetites. One of them who went by the name of Winkler used to show us his photos of hanged Jewish boys on the Russian front. We took it rather calmly, without panic, although they never disguised their intention of eliminating all the Jews. This couldn't be accomplished until the Russian campaign created the conditions and space - particularly in Poland - that would facilitate wholesale liquidation. As yet, in the year 1943, the killings still took place conveniently out of sight.

The labour camp had its own system of organisation, rules and distinctive practices. It was a world of violence, quite apart from any notion of law, order and ethical restraints. We quickly recognised that we were an underprivileged minority, tolerated only for our economic usefulness. But we knew that the Germans did not lack logic. It was obvious to everybody that as the war proceeded, Germany would need all the productive labour it could find and it was clear that the anti-Jewish policy made available an enormous supply of skilled labour.

But we were wrong. Far from exploiting the situation to their economic advantage, the Nazis operated the work camps as if economic considerations were irrelevant, forcing the Jewish inmates to work at unproductive, repetitive and useless tasks, with inadequate food and rest and under constant torture by brutal guards, until they collapsed.

---

# From Koszeg to the Carpathian mountains

We had spent approximately two months in Koszeg when the order came to be ready to move out. Nobody knew where we were going, but it wasn't too hard to figure out that the Russian front needed its diminishing work-force replenished. The train progressed in an easterly direction confirming our predictions about our destination. Then, unexpectedly, it stopped at the frontier, right in the heart of the Carpathian Mountains, at a place called Uzsok (Oozhok)<sup>10</sup>. As we jumped from the train, we sank knee-deep into the fresh snow.

The sergeant briefed us about our situation. We would be assigned to work, but since the Jews didn't deserve to live, and were in fact condemned to die, any work should be considered merely as a delay in the inevitable - elimination. The guards had strict instructions to make conditions as unpleasant as possible since Jews deserve to be punished for their past crimes.

Our work consisted in building bunkers at the top of the mountain. I am still puzzled by the logic and wisdom of the military experts of the time. How did they expect to lure the Russian Army to the virtually inaccessible peak of the mountain with their T54 tanks and heavy artillery, when they could use the regular roads? But our duty was to fulfil the daily quota, no questions asked. The biggest part of our working day was taken up climbing in single file, in the deep snow. From time to time, the guards had the need for some entertainment. On a steep hill, they would order us to sit down facing the mountain. On the way down, we would

---

<sup>10</sup> Now it is called Ushgorod and is part of the Ukraine.

---

be ordered to do push-ups facing the valley. They found these activities very amusing.

Perhaps the worst enemy was the bitter cold. By the time we had finished our day, our boots were wet, inside and out. In the morning the heavy leather was frozen hard making them extremely painful to put on. We cut down a beautiful pine-forest, and used the timber for building the bunkers which completed our assignment. I don't know if anybody ever used those bunkers, but I do know that they didn't stop the Russian Army.

We were given food, but it was inadequate. Cold and hunger were constants. My father's winter coat served me well, day and night. One day returning to our quarters, we had to traverse a snow-field with deep, freshly fallen snow. It wasn't our usual route but we thought we'd take a short cut. After a few minutes we realised we hadn't made the right decision. Some of the boys turned back; others, including myself, kept on going. It became harder and harder to pull our feet out of the snow. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the mountains and consequently the temperature started to drop. I could see that George next to me was struggling to keep up with the group. Suddenly he said to me, 'I can't go any further'. 'What do you mean, you can't go on?'. 'I will stay here', he said calmly, 'you just carry on'. The others were already a fair distance in front of us and I started to consider the options. If I left him there, the outcome was certain. On the other hand, I knew that even if I stayed with him, I wouldn't be able to give him any physical help. Fortunately I was spared the decision as the solution came from elsewhere.

We heard a noise behind us that became progressively louder. A group of skiers were returning from a day on the slopes. Three boys and two girls. They carried their skis on their shoulders and were discussing the quality of the snow and the weather conditions. As they passed us, George

---

---

turned to them and said, ‘excuse me, do you think you could help me, I can’t pull my feet out of the snow’. They stopped and glancing at our yellow armbands, they looked at each other for a second. ‘Help you?’, said one of them, ‘of course’. He lifted his ski high above his head and hit George on the back with great force. With his feet firmly embedded in the snow, George fell flatly, face down. I couldn’t help him, but he slowly straightened up on his own and wiping the snow off his face, even managed a faint smile and said, ‘it didn’t hurt me’. By that time, the skiers were already far away. I wanted so much to look into their eyes and memorise their faces, but they didn’t look back. From a distance the only thing we could hear was their laughter.

Ironically, because of the fall, George was somehow able to release his feet and harnessing all of our remaining energy, we made our way back. Nobody noticed our late arrival and there was a lot of unusual movement. Our ration for the following day was being distributed because we had to move further inland, into Hungary and away from the Russian front. The Russian Army was advancing relentlessly.

A few days later George became the only one among us who tried to commit suicide. He hung himself, but was cut loose in time. As it turned out, he survived this whole retreating journey, the death march from Uzsok to Mauthausen (in Austria), where he was liberated in May. My latest information is that today he lives happily with his family in Hungary.

## A lost opportunity

After a few days of marching south-west, we arrived at our next destination - a little Hungarian village with beautiful scenery and an unusually friendly population. Our job was to mine the main road leading into the country. Obviously, the military planners had learned their lesson and instead of building bunkers on mountain-tops, they were now trying to destroy the roads so as to slow the Russian advance. We had to dig deep holes alongside the highway and the technical division attached to the army then went in to place the explosives. This was the most comfortable period of our life in the labour camp. Four men were assigned to digging the hole but only one could work at a time so while one worked, the other three watched him with great interest (not unlike council workers).

One day word came that the highest ranking officer - the one responsible for the project - would be inspecting the place. We were lined up alongside the road when his limousine arrived. The driver got out of the car and opened the door for the officer who was accompanied by two other military personnel. Their presence made everybody - including us - seem very important and judging by their smug facial expressions, they must have believed that those empty holes by the side of the road were the secret weapon that would stop the Russian Army. The officer with his entourage started the inspection by looking into each hole - all of which were exactly identical - and at each man. As he approached me, his face became more and more familiar and then I recognised him! It was Tibor Bakos, a school friend of mine, right from kindergarten through high school. He stopped opposite me and our eyes met. I could see his embarrassment, the fact that he did not know what to do next. He automatically saluted me and quickly continued the inspection. I was very excited - hopeful that he would make contact with me. But it never happened.

---

There was a little episode that occurred that should be recorded to his credit. The order came that we were not allowed to accept or buy any food from the locals. Those caught doing so were to be severely punished. One day at the work-place as I was drinking the milk I had just received from a passer-by, Bakos arrived unexpectedly on a push-bike. As I couldn't hide the bottle, I was in effect standing there with a smoking gun. He smiled at me, then turned around and walked away.

I often think of him. At that stage of the war, he must have known (indeed, should have known) that he was backing the wrong horse, in effect fighting a lost cause. He was, after all, at the top of our class. Granted, they didn't teach subjects like Decency or Tolerance. A piece of bread, a handshake, or just a few encouraging words! One would never again be able to buy respect and honour at such bargain basement prices. Astronaut Armstrong, the first man to land on the moon, sent the message: 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'. Bakos couldn't make the small step. He carried on like a toy-train making its pre-determined rounds, unable to stop or change direction. He had the opportunity in his hands and he lost it.

After the war I didn't hear of or from him until the 1980s when he wrote me a long letter. Without mentioning our war-time encounter, he wrote about his sufferings which occurred after the war. We continued to correspond and today we are still in contact and I send him a present every Christmas.

## Reunion in Sumeg

In 1993 my wife and I went to Sumeg for a school reunion. Bakos organised the hotel for us and was waiting at Sumeg's railway station when we arrived. He was rather hesitant when he kissed my wife's hand in the old style and embraced me like a long lost relative. I asked him where the taxi rank was and he told me there were no taxis at the train station. Before I could stop him, he grabbed our heavy luggage and carried it all the way to the hotel. We stopped several times on the hill to give him a chance to rest.

The reunion itself was pleasant and well-organised. I was asked to make a speech and this took place in our old classroom. Present at the time were the Mayor, two of our old teachers, a few of the current teaching staff, and about a dozen of my old school-mates, their wives and some other



*Reunion in Shumeg, myself, (front) and Tibor Bakos (on my left).*

---

guests. I am not sure that they liked what I said, but they applauded loudly. Below is the text of my speech. After the customary greeting, I began:

*I think to most of you I am no stranger. I was born here in Sumeg, where I spent a very important part of my life. My late father was also born here. If you find my way of expressing myself somewhat old-fashioned, a bit rusty, it is not the fault of this school but probably my 47 years' absence. When I look around and see some familiar faces, I'd like to mention those who through no fault of their own could not be present on this happy occasion. I am thinking of those whose lives were cruelly interrupted by the war. I am also thinking of those who have left in the 'natural way'. And others who could not travel here for reasons of poor health or otherwise. Despite their physical absence, I feel that they are somehow with us, filling this classroom, reminding us that everything is finite, our happiness and our sorrow.*

*There is a Chinese blessing, or rather a curse, that says: 'May you live in interesting times'. Looking at our past, we cannot say that our life was boring. We really did live in interesting times. The years of the 1920s and the beginning of the next decade were relatively peaceful. But as we approached the 1940s, we could see the menacing storm clouds on the horizon. We felt like we were sitting on a time bomb that could explode at any time.*

*Our anxiety and fear were well justified. The bomb went off with a tremendous explosion and the storm swept away millions of innocent people. Some of us made a deal with Satan and gave him a hand in his devilish work. There were others, the so-called by-standers. The following quotation is credited to Albert Einstein: 'The world is a dangerous place to live in, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who watch and let it happen'.*

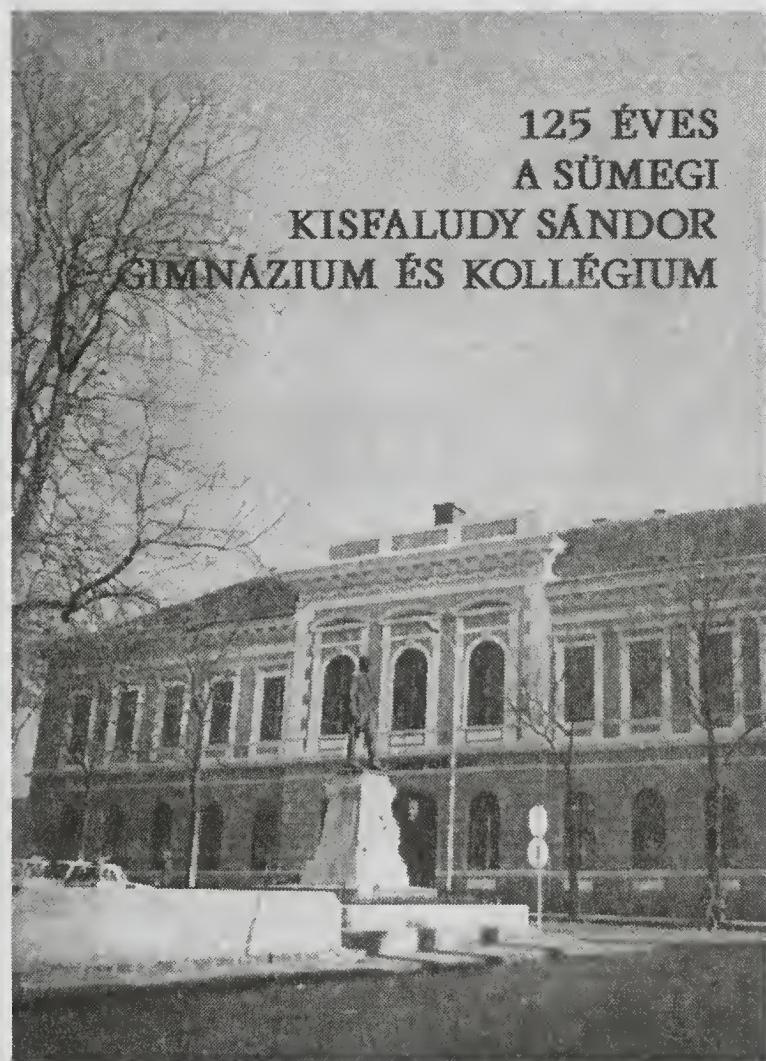
*We are unable to change the past. Only history books can do*

---

*that, depending on who is writing, and in which period. But the saying goes: ‘Those who don’t learn from history are condemned to repeat it’.*

*When we left this school we thought that all the examinations were over. We didn’t know that we would be judged in other subjects later in our lives. We never learned about Tolerance and how to accept our fellow-men, even if they are different from us. We will be judged on the legacy, the moral heritage we are handing over to the next generation, to our children and grandchildren. I only hope that none of us will fail at this examination.*

*My school in Shumeg*



---

## Bel-Ami

He was small and slightly built, with an olive complexion. He took every opportunity to comb the black hair that matched his black eyes, the sort of eyes they could smile independently, without the support of other facial features. He had a big nose, quite out of proportion to his face, but it didn't spoil his overall appearance. He was always ready to make a joke at his own expense: like, he would say, about his nose, that it was all a big mistake - when they were giving out noses, he went up and collected twice.

We all had good friends within the group but Bel-Ami was everybody's friend. You may ask why he was nicknamed Bel-Ami and I would have to tell you that I don't know but that the name fit him like a glove. He told us that he had lost his father a few years back and he had been working with his mother at the flea-market where they had a stand selling cloth. Of the market, he had endless stories to entertain us.

In 1944 the German cause was hopelessly lost. The Allied armies were closing in from every direction. The concentration camps and the labour camps were being closed. Our march began and took us over long distances, with Death in constant attendance on the way, or waiting at the end of the road. Although logic might have counselled a cessation of brutality against us and either our liberation or our delivery into Allied hands, the guards remained true to their hatred, driving us senselessly towards goals unknown even to themselves. We received less and less food and as we walked and fell, the beatings became more frequent. It became obvious from their actions that the purpose of the operation was not to arrive anywhere.

---

During the march, my winter coat became heavier and heavier until when I could carry it no longer, I was ready to make the hard decision. My friend, Ernest, took it to exchange for some home-made bread. We found a quiet corner and sat down. He took the bread between his knees. Producing a knife, he cut a slice for himself and one for me. Then another and another, until the last bite. Did I sell the coat too cheaply? What is the price of a life, even if it buys only a day or two?

The march started to take its toll. Bel-Ami became sick and he got permission to ride on the horse-drawn wagon that was used to transport the kitchen and the guards' belongings. When we stopped late in the afternoon, he was ordered to get off and to join us in the deserted barn where we were due to spend the night. He must have had a temperature because his face was burning and he could not move. The sergeant walked to the side of the barn where there were some shovels lined up in a neat row. He took his time selecting one, with great concentration, rather like a customer in a hardware shop, choosing the most suitable tool for his task. He walked back to the wagon and without displaying any anger, he hit Bel-Ami who was inside the wagon. Bel-Ami uttered not a sound. Crawling he moved his body to the edge of the wagon at which point he overbalanced and fell to the ground. He lay there in the foetal position, looking no older than a young boy. His tormentor proceeded to beat him mercilessly with the shovel. At the start of the beating, he tried to protect his head with his hands, but as it continued, his broken body became an open target for the beast. A streak of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth and the sergeant stopped the beating. He took the shovel back to its original position, and rearranging his uniform, looked around with pride, like a victorious gladiator awaiting applause.

---

An hour later Bel-Ami died. I collected some of his belongings. I didn't know why as I had no use for them. I just couldn't accept the finality of an innocent, young life terminated at the age of twenty-two. I found a note-book containing addresses, a small knife, a wallet with a few coins, a belt and his precious comb. Around his neck he wore a chain with *chai* (life) engraved on it, which he probably got for his Bar-Mitzvah. This I couldn't take. I left it with him. I put everything in a small paper bag. Good-bye Bel-Ami! I hope there's a market in heaven where you can sell stars to Angels... or maybe you are one of them.

## Farewell to Hungary

We reached the Austro-Hungarian border and were told that we were to be handed over to the Germans, but that before the transfer, we had to go through some formalities. Regarding what happened next, the usual defence of the small-time war criminal - 'I was only following orders' - doesn't apply. The order didn't come from higher up. It was initiated and organised by ordinary people - the ex-teacher, the bootmaker, the peasant, etc. etc.

We had to line up in front of the headquarter of the Arrow Cross (the Hungarian Nazi Party). It was a two storey prison-like building, with small windows protected by iron bars. They called the first four boys in. As I was in the first row with Ernest, we went in and up the stairs to the second floor. There was a large room packed with people in Nazi uniform. They stood us up against the wall and four men broke away from the group and faced each of us. One of the four was a gendarme. A fifth sat on a chair watching us with a gun in his hand.

Before we had time to get familiar with our surroundings, they started to beat us, not unlike a boxer punching a bag. The fellow opposite me looked about the same age as me and seemed slightly hesitant at the beginning - it may have been his 'first job'. The gendarme must have noticed this, because he pushed him aside saying 'let me introduce myself'. He hit me with a great force. It felt like an earthquake with my ear as the epicentre. I must have passed out for a few seconds because the next thing I realised was that they were pushing us through a back door where a spiral staircase led to the rear of the building. On the stairs, the guards were waiting with sticks, beating us indiscriminately. As we tried to avoid them, some of us fell, taking with them those in front. Beaten and bruised, we had to line up again. Every few minutes another four boys

---

arrived and looking at them we knew that they had received the same treatment. Ernest had a small cut on his forehead. I asked him if it hurt him. He said that what hurt him was the anger that he couldn't hit back. 'I could have eaten him for breakfast', he said, 'but for that bastard with the gun'.

This episode, more than any other, made a lasting impression on me. I realised that I was not wanted in my country. I made the decision then and there that if I survived the war, I would not stay in Hungary. When 'the formalities' were completed, we proceeded to the boom-gate that separated Hungary from Austria. As our names were read out, we walked over to the other side of the border, where a few German soldiers were waiting.

One chapter closed and another opened, the former full of suffering, the new one full of uncertainty. We had no idea how long it would last. After the war I found out that the Hungarian guards organised a party to celebrate the departure of the Jewish boys. Their mission was complete.

# Escape

We were taken over by the German Todt Army<sup>12</sup> consisting of people who due to their age or some health reason were unfit for combat duties. They supervised our work which once again was digging trenches. We were properly fed and told not to work too hard, other than at the times when the SS. came to check on us. They knew that the war was lost for the Germans and their only wish was to go home to their families. Our relatively easy life didn't last long because the SS. came and stayed.

The dreaded march started again and our new masters told us that we didn't have to work any more. It didn't take a lot of imagination to understand what they meant. We passed through beautiful little Austrian villages where I noticed a definite change in the people's attitude towards us. Rather than coming out of their houses to watch us, as they used to, they went inside. They didn't want to see us; they didn't want to know us. Perhaps they were ashamed.

My memories of those journeys is incomplete - the never-ending highways alongside the flat stretches of scrubby grassland and steep-sided river banks. What a contrast between that world - only a few slippery downward steps away - and ours. Our food supply stopped completely and we relied on the remnants of food in the discarded tins which the retreating Germans had left on the side of the road.

One day as we were passing through a village, a little child came out of a house, wide-eyed and wondering what it was all about. She was holding an apple, ready to bite into it. She was freshly washed and clothed and had some flowers in her hair. As I passed her, suddenly an animal instinct

---

<sup>12</sup> This section of the army was named after General Todt (Tot).

---

came over me which I couldn't resist - I grabbed the apple from her hand. Her eyes were sparkling and she didn't quite know what to do - to cry, to laugh or to jump. I quickened my pace so as get lost in the crowd and when I was certain that I was out of danger, I shared the apple with Ernest.

The constant marching, in tandem with hunger and exhaustion, created different reactions - different manifestations in different people. Some were just walking like robots without thinking. Some were constantly talking about food. Some were swearing. Others (not many) were praying, even though the gates of heavenly mercy were closed to us. There was no end to it except if you stopped and sat down on the roadside. In that case it was all over quietly and efficiently, with a single bullet. Human endurance seems endless when you are 22 years old. I was extremely hungry, but otherwise I felt healthy and so were my friends - except for Joe. We could see that his heart condition would prevent him from going on much further. Joe's best friend was Alex who came from the same country town and was also a friend of Ernest's. We all agreed that we couldn't leave Joe behind. The only solution was to escape and wait for the liberators.

It is amazing that the really big decisions in life are made very easily and quickly. Without any further planning, we decided to run into the forest. This part of the escape didn't seem to be very difficult. We numbered approximately 3,000 'surrounded' by only six SS men. Admittedly, they were fully armed with machine guns and some of them were on motor-bikes circling the groups, always at the same interval. In actual fact, that made it easier for us to work out when to break away and run.

At the last minute, the four of us were joined by Karl, and one by one we made our way into the forest. The run used up whatever energy we had left and we collapsed under a big tree. We were on the mountain-side, overlooking the

---

valley dotted with little farms and a stream of water which was like a silver ribbon in the sun. We were somewhere near Graz.

Here and there, the sun came out through the thick foliage and there was the smell of flowers. It was a beautiful morning and the dew was still heavy on the ground. A breeze was coming across the valley, carrying the distant, monotonously regular noise of heavy Russian guns punctuated by the sound of church-bells from the villages. A large, black squirrel came down the tree to investigate us and seemingly satisfied, it went away. What a lucky creature! With everything around us so quiet, exhaustion overtook hunger and we fell asleep.

I woke up with a terrible stomach-ache. My friends were all asleep and I walked away to relieve myself, carefully memorising our position so as to be able to find my way back. I arrived at a football-field encircled by a very thick line of bush that served as a natural fence around the ground. I pulled the bush apart to see what was behind it. On the other side there was a little house, probably the change-room. I also saw a trench-line twisting around the field. There were people sitting on the edge of the trench, their legs hanging down. Two German soldiers came out of the building, one of them was a woman. They stood behind the people and the male soldier took out his gun and started shooting them at point blank range in the back of their head. One by one, they slipped into the trench. He evidently ran out of bullets, because he exchanged guns with the woman so as to carry on with the execution.

I couldn't watch any longer and as I lay on the ground, I pressed my face into the grass, holding my ears firmly with my hands so as not to hear the gunshots. When I looked up again, everything was quiet, they had all disappeared - victims and killers. Was I still alive? Could it be only a nightmare? I went back to my friends and Ernest asked

---

---

me, half-asleep with his eyes closed, where I had been. I didn't have to answer because in the next instant he was asleep again. I never told anyone about that experience.

After the war, we heard that two days after our escape, as our group arrived at the Austrian town of Eisenertz, the machine guns went into action. They killed over a thousand boys, most in their early twenties. The rest continued to Mauthausen concentration camp.

When my friends woke up, we washed our faces in the creek and tried to work out our next step. We all had only one overwhelming desire: to eat. As we had no money, we had to get food in some other way. We went to the nearest farm and knocked on the door. A woman opened it. As we were wearing military uniform, we told her we were retreating soldiers and had run out of food. She excused herself that the only food she could offer us was potatoes and maybe some beans. This seemed like a dream to us. We also asked for a box of matches and could hardly wait to get back to the safety of the forest, where we cooked and ate our first decent meal for many days.

The liberators didn't arrive. The guns were silent. There was a lull in the fighting. What should we do? We couldn't go on begging for food for long without raising suspicion, so we decided to look for work. By then we realised that being able-bodied men, we were a commodity in short supply. Since all the menfolk had been called up, the women had been left to carry on with the demanding, often hard physical farm labour.

We went down to the valley where we found a little community of only a few houses. The name of the village was Tiefernitz. We knocked on the door of the first house. A young woman in her early 30s opened the door, a little boy of three or four holding onto her skirt. In the back of the kitchen an older woman, possibly the grandmother, was

---

cooking. We told them that we were looking for work. She didn't try to hide her interest but also told us that she couldn't afford to pay wages. We told her that food and lodging would suffice.

The next part was the hard part - she needed only one helper, certainly not five. Who should be the one? We let her choose. She didn't want to be the one who chose but we insisted. The process reminded me of African slaves, assembled for inspection at the market-place, waiting to be sold to their future masters. Blushing, trying to appear as casual as possible; she pointed at me. We all then exchanged home-addresses and contact points and the others left. I found out later that they all found work in the neighbouring village.

---

## On the farm

How bound we are to the past! Or maybe we **are** the past. Layer upon layer of undigested memories that pursue us day and night. Occasionally, there's a break-through, revealing a clear light. The past, the present and the future are tied together by the long string of memories.

Her name was Sophie Greiner. The husband was on the Russian front. The little boy's name was Fritz. She explained the house rules and my work to me. Wake up around six o'clock. Fetch the drinking water for the horses and cows. Clean them and then the barn. Then breakfast and out to the field where the two of us work together. We have a rest while we have lunch. Late in the afternoon we return home. After dinner I can retire to my sleeping quarters - to the barn where four cows and two horses lay on their mats of straw and dung. Their well-being was my responsibility, while Sophie looked after the pigs and chickens.

Coming from a country town, it didn't take long to acquire the necessary skill to do the farm work. Summer was not far away, but the nights were still cold in the mountains. Though I was given a blanket, I got up more than once in the middle of the night to warm my hands and feet on an animal's body. The horses, cows and I became instant friends. Sometimes I talked to them, knowing I could trust them.

Sophie asked if she could swap my army jacket for civilian clothes. Although my jacket was in good condition, compared to the worn-out clothes she gave me, I didn't mind the transaction because it was less conspicuous to be in civilian garb. She loved that jacket, wearing it every day except Sundays. With adequate food I quickly regained my strength

---

and I knew that Sophie was satisfied with my work, even if she never said so.

It was a very simple existence and my main interest was to look forward to the next meal. After an early dinner, I usually said good night and retired to my quarters to think about my family. I knew nothing of Auschwitz and hopeful expectations were running through my head. Had I had pen and paper, I would have written my thoughts down but where in that place were such things to be found?

One evening as I was letting loose my imagination regarding the future, the door of the barn suddenly opened and closed in quick succession. Countless thoughts ran through my mind, feeding the fear that froze my whole body. Had I been found out? I opened my eyes and saw Sophie standing next to me. From where I lay on the straw-bed, she seemed very tall, though in fact she was of average size. Standing there motionless, she seemed to be contemplating something. Then with a sudden and continuous movement, she dropped the army jacket and slid beneath my blanket. The jacket fell like a lifeless body. She didn't talk to me and I don't know how long she stayed. Her evening visits became regular but our boss and farmhand relationship didn't change. She made a point of the fact that as nothing could advance my position, I still belonged in the barn.

## Liberation

It was the month of May and a lovely morning, clear following the rain. There were tender new leaves on the trees and a slight breeze made them dance. The grass was green and lush and the cattle were eating it hungrily, as if they knew that a few months from then, there would be not a blade left. Sophie was exceptionally quiet, concentrating on her work, without talking to me. This I didn't mind because it allowed me to be alone with my thoughts.

Suddenly there came a shout across the distance. I looked up to see Ernest traversing through the field with giant steps, like Gulliver, disregarding the path and trampling the plants in his way. 'Are you crazy - still working? The war is over!'. Seeing our excitement, Sophie didn't need any explanation. Quietly she started to collect our tools and told me that we should go back home. For me it was an anti-climax, even a disappointment. Millions of people had waited anxiously for this day and I expected celebrations all over the world. Instead, it was Ernest who announced the end of the war, and rather unceremoniously at that.

It was only afterwards that I realised - there was nobody to celebrate. The victims' voices could not be heard from their mass graves. The perpetrators were washing the blood from their hands, busy producing alibis and excuses. And the survivors were trying to collect the fragments of their past lives and start again, with some semblance of normality.

When we arrived back at the house, my other friends were already waiting there. We decided to stay a day or two until we could make contact with the liberators, but once again they didn't come to Tiefernitz. Unable to wait any longer, we all wanted to return home. Sophie prepared some food

---

for me to take and it was the first time I saw her cry. She said that she was thinking of her husband and how lucky we were - free to go home. It was at this point that I told her that we were Jews. She nearly fainted.

---

## Home-coming

We were free. We felt strong and very happy to be able to part from our constant companion - fear. Nothing else could happen to us. My recollection of this period is incomplete. I don't remember how long it took me to reach my home town of Sumeg. I don't know how we organised our food supply, or where we spent the nights, but I do remember travelling on trains, mostly on top of them, and long walks where the train tracks were destroyed. Crossing the border into Hungary, we then had to go our separate ways - Ernest and Karl to Budapest, Alex and Joe to Szombathely (Sombathay). I said farewell to them and continued in the direction of Sumeg.

There were a lot of people on the road, going in all directions. They were all carrying something, as if they sought to restore somehow the imbalance created by the war. It was early in the morning and cheerful birds were making an awful lot of noise. The sun was just touching the treetops when I stopped in front of our old place. The outside of the building hadn't changed. I could even make out my carving - K.D. - on the gate. I walked into the court-yard and there was my black cat Kormosh (Sooty), watching me with great interest. As I approached, he ran away. I was very disappointed. After all, this was the cat that had once been allowed to sleep on my bed, against my parents advice of course. Maybe this was his way of expressing his reproach for leaving him behind. If I only could explain to him what happened!

I came up to the front door which was half-opened and knocked. There was no answer, so I looked in. I saw a woman with a baby in the back of the hall. The baby was crying and the poor mother was doing her best to calm him. She sang to him, scolded him, patted and rocked him, but in

---

vain. Finally she noticed me standing at the door and called her husband. A man in his 40s came out and opening the door entirely but without hiding his suspicion, asked me, ‘are you looking for someone?’. His words seemed to come from far away, reverberating from every corner of the room, like an echo - l-o-o-k-i-n-g f-o-r s-o-m-e-o-n-e... He explained to me that they were refugees from Transylvania and that our house had been designated to them by the authorities. He also told me that they didn’t mind if I moved in and had my old room back. I told him I would think about the offer. I preferred to stay with a friend who was also alone. I never went back to my place.

---

## An unfinished business

The euphoria of freedom slowly evaporated. I wanted to escape from the emptiness of the present but I kept going back to the past, sometimes projecting a more promising future, but it was like trying to pump life into something that was dead. I soon realised that life was moving not like an arrow but like a boomerang. The same people who had been mesmerised by Nazi ideology were now towing the Communist line. I was offered a high position in the police force<sup>13</sup> but I wanted only one thing - to leave Hungary. I joined a Zionist group with the intention of going to Palestine. At that time the British were restricting Jewish immigration and the only option was to go illegally. This didn't worry me too much but I didn't know that after one and a half years of forced labour, I'd spend another one and a half years of my life in Austria and Italy in so-called DP (Displaced Persons) Camps, still suffering the solitary confinement of my past. I was to present myself in Budapest for a briefing before they were willing to take me across the border, by foot, in the middle of the night.

I felt that before I left, I had one more duty to fulfil - looking up Bel-Ami's mother and taking his belongings back to her. I found the address in his little note-book. It was a middle class suburb that used to be known as the Ghetto. The tram I took was over-crowded with people hanging on the stairs. I was happy to get off, stretch my legs and look at the house numbers. Subconsciously I was hoping I wouldn't find the place. Maybe she had moved out or maybe the house had been bombed during the siege of Budapest? But there it was.

---

<sup>13</sup> As a Jew I could be counted on to be fervently anti-Nazi.

---

In front of the gate there was a man sitting and playing the mouth organ. He was dressed in a worn-out military uniform and he had one leg missing. There was a container in front of him with a few coins in it. Most of the people passing him did so without so much as a glance, but a few threw him a coin and not because they had any interest in the old military marches he was playing. That's when he would stop playing and a loud 'thank you' would follow. Then he would carefully rearrange his leg and continue with the song.

The gate of the building was open and I entered into a small court-yard where a teenage boy was kicking a soccer ball against the wall with great skill. There was chalk mark on the wall which was clearly what he was aiming at. I stopped for a while and watched him, waiting for a break to ask him directions. As he kicked on continuously and I didn't want to wait any longer, I asked, 'Mrs. Rosen?'. Without taking his eyes off the ball he answered, '3rd floor, door 30'. As I went to the staircase, he shouted after me, 'Careful, there are loose steps on the 2nd floor'.

My heart was pounding, not because of the stairs but because I just didn't know how I was going to tell her what happened to her son. I knocked on the door. When she opened it, I had no doubt that this was Bel-Ami's mother. The same face, the same nose! 'Mrs. Rosen, I am a friend of your son's'. 'Please come in, come in. He's not home from the war yet. I'm expecting him any day now. I believe some of his friends are already back, but I am sure that he has a good reason for not being among the first. He's such a smart boy. Please sit down. Coffee or tea? It's not easy to get but I've put some away especially for him when he arrives and, of course, for his friends. Here, have some home-made biscuits. They're not as good as they used to be because it's hard to get hold of good chocolate.' She was talking non-stop and I was grateful for it because it saved me - even

---

---

temporarily - from having to tell my story. She went to the kitchen to bring the coffee in and I could see her wiping tears from her eyes. Was this maternal instinct? She was talking about everything - the political situation, her son's exploits at the age of three and four, the fact that he is the best salesman at the market - always carefully using the present tense.

By then, I'd made up my mind not to tell her. I finished my coffee, looked at my watch, and stood up, excusing myself by saying that I had a lot of work to do. As I was leaving, she asked for my phone number to give to her son but I told her that for the time being I was not contactable. She kissed my face and I left. As I was going downstairs, she called me back... 'Young man, you forgot your parcel'. She was standing there with the brown paper bag containing her son's belongings. I thanked her, took it and left in a hurry. The man with the mouth organ was still outside playing. As I passed him, I placed the parcel next to him. I could see his surprise and as I rushed off I heard a loud 'thank you', and then the music started up again.

The next day I left Hungary.

## Tiefernitz revisited

When I look back at my post-war existence, two milestones stand out most prominently on the highway of my life - my wife and my son. My wife gave me love and understanding, trying hard to compensate me for my past losses and sufferings. She supported and helped me to build a happy and promising future in a new country, while she herself was also in the process of overcoming her grief. She lost her parents and most of her family in the Holocaust. Our son gave us a pleasure we had never experienced before. He represented a New Beginning for us. I know that they deserve more than a passing reference but I feel that at this point I have to disregard chronology in order to complete the past and close the circle.



*The text (translated) on the Eisenertz Memorial reads:*

For those without names,  
Driven away by force from their homeland,  
Without judgement, deprived of their freedom,  
Suffering cruelly without compassion,  
Persecuted and killed.  
How could the world tolerate such injustice?

---

The year was 1979. Our son, Robert, had finished his studies at Sydney University and had gone to Cambridge to do a post-graduate course in International Law. When he finished his examinations, we joined him there. We hired a car and spent a holiday together travelling through most of Europe. After France and Switzerland, we crossed the border into Austria - this time with a legal passport. I knew that a memorial had been erected at Eisenertz where the Germans had committed the mass killings two days after my escape. I felt compelled to go there.

The scenery was very picturesque with high mountains and a lake. We couldn't find the memorial and although we asked several people, nobody seemed to know about it. As we passed a convent, my wife and Robert went in to ask directions. Two nuns came out and obligingly pointed to the simple monument we were looking for. It was only a small distance away. The stone was rather neglected and hardly visible through all the weeds and the high grass that had grown around it. With the passage of a few more years, nobody will find it - but, then, who is going to look for it? My son handed me a prayer book and I said the customary words for the departed. I remembered again those young boys as they were marched along the road and I wasn't sure that I was still on talking terms with G-d. Many answers have been given and perhaps many are needed, but there is no satisfactory explanation. I walked slowly back to our car, deep in thought and sat down wearily, as if all the energy had been drained out of me.

My wife and my son obviously noticed my distress and they came up with an idea: how about going to see the farm where I had worked after my escape? I knew they wanted to finish the day on a happier note. Going there was easier said than done. Very few people had heard of Tiefernitz and we received contradictory directions along the way. By the time we reached it, it was late in the afternoon.

---

I stopped the car on the dirt road leading to the handful of houses situated on the hill. I saw a young man repairing the fence. When he noticed us he stopped working. I got out of the car and asked him whether he knew where Sophie Greiner lived. He gave me a long look and speaking very deliberately, he answered, 'Yes, she is my mother'. 'Then you must be Fritz', I said. 'How do you know my name?'. I told him briefly that I had worked there on their farm during the war and that I had come back with my wife and son to see his mother and the place again.

He told us to wait while he announced us. It took quite a while till he came back and called us in. The interior of the house hadn't changed in 34 years. The same heavy, round wooden table and chairs which looked as if they had been recovered from a time capsule. The mother was sitting at the table, visibly shaken, as the three of us surrounded her. 'Sophie Greiner?', I asked. She nodded. 'Do you remember the young man who worked here towards the end of the war?'. 'No, I don't'. 'But you are Sophie Greiner, aren't you?'. 'Yes'.

With this coming at the end of an exhausting day, I started to lose my patience and must have sounded like an interrogator trying to force a confession from a criminal. It was to no avail. Without even looking at me, she continued to select the beans, putting the fit ones in a container. My wife and my son were taking photos outside while I chatted to Fritz in front of the barn. He told me that his father never returned from the war. He also said that because he knew that his mother needed him, he never married, unlike his brother who lives in Gratz and works as an accountant. 'Your brother? I didn't know you had a brother'. 'Yes, he is younger than me. He was born just after the war. He never knew our father.'

We thanked him for his hospitality and we left. At the end of the dirt road, I had to stop the car before turning onto

---

---

the highway. In the rear mirror I could see Sophie and Fritz standing in front of the gate, resting their arms on each other's shoulders. They held their free hands in front of their eyes. I am not sure whether they were waving goodbye or simply using their palms as a shield against the blinding sun. But I am certain that Sophie was wearing an old army jacket.

I heard my son telling me, 'Dad, you can turn now, there're no cars coming'. I stepped on the accelerator and Tiefernitz disappeared in a cloud of dust.

---

## Epilogue

Absorption in the past is no way to start a new life. In our new home we were busy building the present and occasionally dreaming about the future. Living in a different and far-away country, it took 15 to 20 years before I felt able to trace back old friendships. Then I had an intense desire to find out what became of the four friends with whom I had escaped death.

Karl. I made several inquiries, but without any result. Nobody knew what happened to him. It is possible that he left the country illegally and there was no way of finding him.

Alex. On our trip to Hungary I made a special effort to go to Szombathely where he lived. He came over to our hotel and we had dinner together. We spent a very pleasant evening and I was happy to see that he had no difficulties fitting into the new order. But it surprised me how quickly we ran out of topics of mutual interest.

Joe. He also lived in Szombathely, but he couldn't find time to see me.

Ernest. In the 70s I heard that he was living somewhere in Israel and I placed an advertisement for missing persons in an Israeli newspaper. Soon afterwards, I received a letter from his wife. She wrote that Ernest had gone to the then Palestine and had worked in a hospital as a driver and gardener. In 1969 he suffered a heart attack and died, at the age of forty-seven.



*My second life begins: our honeymoon, Normandy, 1950*

## ► My Second Life

I wanted to take the term ‘memoirs’ quite literally and only record things that sprang spontaneously from my memory. If there are events I have forgotten over the course of the years, then let them stay in the sub-conscious, forgotten. I never kept a diary and hardly ever made notes, so I would rather run the risk of making the odd mistake than disregarding the limits of my memory. Although I have tried to stick to the truth, my writing, it seems to me, still bears a certain resemblance to an adventure story. This is not my fault: the guilty party is Life itself.

## Austria

In April 1946 I left Hungary with a group of Zionists with the intention of reaching and settling in Palestine. We crossed the border illegally. Included among us were my sister-in-law’s sister, Lily, her husband Macko, my sister-in-law’s brother, Leslie and a very close childhood friend of mine, Steven and his wife, Ili. If the year 1946 was difficult, then I can only describe 1947 as the year in which the situation in Palestine got completely out of hand as far as the British were concerned. In the course of that year, the battle against Jewish immigration turned into open warfare against the refugees. It was as though Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, had nothing else on his mind but how to keep Jewish refugees out of the Jewish homeland. He cast the strength of the British Empire against the will of the Jews and by doing so, he not only brought great suffering to people who had already suffered enormously, but also forced upon thousands of British soldiers a role that must have filled them with horror. I remember staring at some of the Englishmen who guarded our DP detention camp in Austria, wondering how on earth they could reconcile

---

themselves with the fact, that not so long ago, they were liberating from the Nazi camps the very same people - those they now kept pinned down to a confined area.

Camp life was very frustrating: we had to queue up again for food, to live in old military barracks, deprived of privacy and our most basic human rights. I felt that I had to find a way out of this situation and tried on my own to go to Italy. It didn't work out. I was caught on the Italian side of the border and after spending a few days in jail, I was sent back to Austria.

At that time, Austria was divided into four zones run by the American, English, Russian and French Occupation Forces and the movement of population between the zones was completely frozen. A Zionist organisation called Bricha<sup>13</sup> arranged a clandestine route to Palestine - via Italy and from there to Palestine - often via a detention in Cyprus, care of the British. I spent time in a number of different camps - detention centres for stateless people - the last one being in Innsbruck. I was waiting for my turn to be taken to the Promised Land.

In the camps we were not confined to barracks or made to work. But there was not much for us to do or anywhere for us to go, for apart from our statelessness, we had no money. One day, as I was passing in front of a coffee shop outside the precinct of the camp, someone called out my name. I turned back and saw people sitting outside enjoying their coffee with a *Sachertorte*, an Austrian speciality. Then I recognised the person waving to me. It was an old friend by the name of Milan. During the war he had fought the Nazis as a partisan in Yugoslavia, later joining the Russian Army as an officer. After the war, he continued his military career in Russian-occupied Budapest, and as a side-line, in partnership with my sister-in-law (Emery's widow), dealing

---

<sup>13</sup> The word in Hebrew means 'smuggling people across a border to freedom'.

---

on the black market. As a Russian officer he could easily get hold of goods in short supply - which meant nearly everything at that time - and my sister-in-law had the local contacts and expertise to pass it on to the consumers and make the most profit out of it. Milan was a friendly, happy-go-lucky fellow, with a heart of gold. He seemed extremely delighted to see me, pulled over a chair from another table for me and ordered an additional coffee and cake. He told me he was staying in Innsbruck for a while. When I told him I was staying in the camp, he offered to take me back to his hotel as his guest.

The hotel was situated at the top of a mountain and was connected to the outside world by cable-car. It was the most luxurious place I had ever seen. I told Milan that I planned to go to Italy and from there to Palestine. He assured me that as a Russian officer he wouldn't have any problem taking me over the border. After spending a few very pleasant days together, I told him that I wanted to go ahead with my plan. He said he was ready to take me and asked if I knew any other people who also wanted to go and were prepared to pay for it - in advance.

It was easy to organise a group and I was happy that in some way I could repay his generosity towards me. The day was set and everybody was ready for the departure - except Milan. He told me confidentially that the situation has changed on the border and he was unable to keep his promise. I was very upset and asked him to return the money to the people. He said he couldn't do that because he had already spent it. To make the situation even worse, he couldn't pay for the hotel either. He asked me to meet him at three in the morning at the hotel's rear exit. We walked out of the hotel and wishing me good luck, he embraced me, then quickly turned and disappeared into the morning mist. I never saw him again. I returned to the relative safety of the camp, where I spent another six months before I was taken across the border to Italy.

---

## The journey to Paris

Italy will always occupy a special place in my heart. I am sure that I am influenced by the fact that anti-Semitism was never a serious threat to Italian Jews, not even during the Fascist regime.

Before the war, some 37,000 Jews lived in Italy, about 0.01% of the Italian population. I liked the country's history, the language, the people. Nazi-style anti-Semitism was not to the Italian taste.

Our camp in Italy was situated in the city of Milano. Camp life was pretty much the same as it had been in Austria: barracks built of corrugated iron, and again waiting in the queue for food, not knowing how long it would take me to get to Palestine. The year was 1947 and another winter was approaching menacingly. I wanted desperately to get out of the rut I was in.

Our contact with the local population was nearly non-existent. We had discovered by then that penniless foreigners were not the most respected part of the society.

There was a young Romanian fellow in the camp who took groups of people across the Italian-French border, provided they could pay for it. As I didn't have the requisite amount, I gave him in lieu of cash my only asset - a sewing machine. The crossing of the border was relatively uneventful. Arriving in Menton, a French border town, our guide gave us bus tickets and we travelled to Nice, where a Jewish organisation was actively helping newly arrived refugees. They tried to talk us into staying in Nice, but at this stage, we only wanted to reach Paris.

In France it was strange to see a Jewish middle class again. The native-born French Jews were engaged in professions,

---

business and commerce. The foreign-born were predominantly workers and small businessmen. There was very little social contact between the two groups.

Despite an undercurrent of anti-Semitism - native and imported- the Jewish newcomers were generally well received. The French dislike of foreigners was no secret. We soon learned the expression *sal étranger* (dirty foreigner), but the fact that it was not solely aimed at the Jews made the discrimination easier to bear.

Mastering the French language was also an important factor in being accepted in French society. The ready-to-wear clothing industry was largely in Jewish hands and I didn't have any difficulty finding a well- paid job. It was a good feeling - to have money in my pocket, to be able to pay for my modest hotel room and for restaurants. I acquired new friends, all of them working exclusively in the rag-trade. I enjoyed my freedom and did everything I wanted to do, trying to compensate for the lost years.

On the first day of January 1949, I went with a few friends to a students' ball. That's where I met Alice. I asked her for a dance and I knew immediately what I was buying. Although my life was shaped by the terrible, unchangeable, untreatable wound of the Holocaust, the more I got to know her, the more I realised that she was the missing link that I needed to organise my future. I proposed to her and she accepted. We were married on the first day of January 1950, and travelled from Paris to Fontainbleau for our honeymoon.

In films we are used to seeing happy endings when the hero and the heroine get married and live happily ever after. But marriage is not a perpetual honeymoon, where you spend your lives among the moonlit ruins of a medieval castle, holding hands and listening to the peaceful murmur of the sea.

---

---

It was a hard beginning. By marrying me, Alice didn't know that besides being a wife, she had to be a mother, a cook, a mistress, a book-keeper, and a house-keeper. But somehow we managed and despite all the happy, loving years we have spent together, I feel that we are only just beginning. There is so much more to come.



*Our wedding,  
1st January,  
1950*



In Paris we lived a carefree life, our eyes focusing entirely on the present. Change was again precipitated from the outside. The Korean war broke out and the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers threatened once again to transform Europe into a battle-field. We no longer trusted this continent and decided to leave.

---

Where? Anywhere! As I write this I am reminded of the old joke about the nineteenth century Polish Jew from Warsaw, who tells his friend that he is moving to America. The friend exclaims, 'But that's so far away! To which the rootless Jew responds, 'from what?'.

The United States with its quota system was effectively closed to us. Canada or Australia? Whichever came first. We received an Entrance Permit from a friend from Sydney and in two weeks time we were ready to go to the Italian port of Genoa to board the ship Ravello. The trip took seven weeks - 49 happy days. We made friends with the Captain, the Doctor and the Purser and on our second wedding anniversary, they organised a party for us.

The friend who sent us the Permit was waiting for us at Woolloomooloo dock and took us to a boarding-house. It was a typical Australian cottage, a long corridor with four rooms off it. In every room lived another family, all sharing the same kitchen and bathroom. Looking at our tiny room, furnished with one small black wardrobe, one black bed and one black chair, our spirits sank. We couldn't help thinking of the cute little apartment we had left in Paris.

We put down our luggage and went back to our friends on the Ravello. We slept on the ship where we felt more comfortable, and the Captain assured us that in three months' time when they were due to return, they would gladly take us back to Europe, free of charge, where we belong... if that's what we wanted.

The next day our landlord was relieved to see us, having wanted to go to the police station to report our disappearance. In two days we were already in jobs. It didn't take us long to realise that by coming here we had made the right choice. As immigrants we didn't feel exactly at home in Australia. Rather we felt we had found a home.

---

## Our new home

Coming from Paris to Sydney was a great cultural shock to us. I have to remind you that the Australian way of life in the year 1952 was different from the one we witness today. You couldn't find on every street-corner an Indian, Korean or Lebanese restaurant. You could leave the milk money in front of your door. In those days nobody had heard of home invasion. The often-mentioned Bondi tram would noisily zoom down toward the beach and people would offer their seats to pregnant women. To a migrant, the manners and attitudes of the locals sometimes seemed ridiculous. We often don't realise that one's own manners and attitudes seem just as ridiculous in another's eyes.

Australia is a very democratic country, where everybody is called by their given name. You may be Sir William Smith, PhD., but you will be introduced to people like this 'This is Bill, this is June'. For those with a European background, such a custom was very difficult to adopt. My European-born business partner of 35 years still calls me 'Mr. Kaye' and similarly, I call him by his surname. His 35 year-old-son, who was born here, calls me 'David'.

Arriving in Australia, our greatest shock was the language, or rather the lack of it. I discovered several difficulties. Firstly, I couldn't talk to the local people. Secondly, I couldn't understand them. The next stage was when I began to understand foreigners, but not the Australians. The more pronounced their foreign accent, the clearer they sounded to me. I often asked myself, 'will there be a time when I understand the local people, especially on the telephone?"

The language shortcoming is largely compensated by the fact that a migrant's life is very colourful, unpredictable and exciting. Since the newcomer doesn't understand the

---

spoken word, he or she is largely relies on facial expressions and gestures of the person they are talking to.

I want to tell you a true story that happened to a very close friend of mine, soon after he arrived in Sydney, at the time of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. His father had had a printing business in Budapest and because of this, he was convinced that he was fully qualified to take a job with the Government Printing Press. He got a job there, despite his lack of English. After working for a few days, the foreman told him something, pointing his index finger downwards. My friend didn't have the slightest idea what the foreman meant.

The printery consisted of several floors, so by pointing in that direction, my friend thought the foreman wanted him to go to a lower floor. He went down where everybody was busily working, but he didn't know what to do. He went out for a smoke, then visited the toilet several times. As he walked up and down, he was watching people working. Then came tea-time, and then lunch, again a smoke, then a toilet visit until the day was over. The next day was a repetition of the previous one. It went on like this for a while until my friend decided to open his own babywear business. Through an interpreter, he advised his foreman that he was resigning. The foreman expressed his regret, telling him how sorry he was about the timing because my friend was already on a shortlist to be promoted. Now 40 years later, he is still guessing what he was supposed to do.

As I write these lines, I come upon an interesting theory. The language we speak has a direct relation to the geographical position of the person who speaks it. In Australia, my Australian English is tolerable. In the greater part of Europe (except England), it is quite sufficient for my needs. If I go to Hungary (especially Sumeg), it is nearly perfect.

---

After a short time we found our life in Australia hard but rewarding. We used every opportunity to work more and consequently, earn more. In 18 months we had saved enough to pay key money<sup>14</sup> for a very nice apartment at Tamarama Beach and also a beautiful Ford car.

Working for five years in the rag-trade was more than enough for us. As we never liked it, only considering it a means to establish ourselves, we went into partnership with two other couples we hardly knew and changed direction. We started a furniture business where our lack of money and expertise was substituted by enthusiasm and hard work.

During all this time, my wife gave me constant support and especially in the early years she was the backbone of the business. We gave special service to our customers, picking them up and taking them home, even on weekends or after closing time, if it suited them. We spoke more than half a dozen languages between us, which was a great attraction for newcomers who needed everything for their homes: furniture, electrical appliances, floor covering, bedding, etc. On a busy day, the shop turned into a modern Babel, with a different language being spoken in every corner.

I am reminded of an incident that happened to me personally. After the Hungarian revolution, in 1956, there was an influx of newly-arrived Hungarian immigrants. Many of the newcomers turned up in our store, to fill their newly-rented homes with furniture, TVs, refrigerators, etc. One day a fellow walked in and I mistook him for a Hungarian whom I thought I knew from before. I approached him and to make him feel at home I talked to

---

<sup>14</sup> Key money was a landlord's (illegal) compensation for loss of revenue through rent-controlled apartments.

---

him in what I thought was his own language. Following the customary introduction, I carried on talking about everything, the weather, politics, life in the old country, all the while in Hungarian, but I got no response. After I finished my presentation, he looked at me and I still remember his apologetic expression, when he said, ‘sorry..... me....me...no... speak...English’.

Over the years, we opened several other stores, representing a substantial force in home furnishing and the electrical trade.

## Robert

It was September 1955, the second day of the Jewish New Year. The rain washed away the dust of many months and new leaves were beginning to appear. Nature was renewing itself.

I was pacing up and down in the little courtyard of St.Luke's Hospital when finally the doctor came out and said, 'congratulations, you have a little boy'. My first thought was of Alice. She was well and very happy. Later in the day, the nurses put the newly-born babies on display behind a glass screen, so that fathers and other relatives could inspect them.

There was the little bundle with his high forehead, completely bald. It was obvious that he was crying, because his small face was all red from the effort, but his cry was drowned out by the deep baritone of his friend next to him. That one was a big fellow, with long black hair and it seemed to me that he was ready to go to school. Looking at our little one crying and unable to hear his voice, reminded me of Marcel Marceau, the famous French mimic, in miniature. Then I ventured a glance at the Miracle Baby's father who was standing next to me. He was powerfully built with black moustache, looking rather like a Turkish weight-lifter. I could see from the corner of my eye that he was smiling at me, probably thinking 'Look at **my** product!'.

Our baby developed into a handsome little boy, with curly blond hair, blue eyes and was selected for T.V.Commercials as a Typical Australian Boy. The age of puberty - usually a difficult period - passed unnoticed.

People often talk about a generation gap, a communication gap, all sorts of gaps dividing parents and their offspring.

---

Although these days children seem to grow up faster than in previous generations, I never had difficulty communicating with my son, or understanding him, despite his funny way of talking English.

---

The 7th July, 1988 was a typical winter's day. The sky was opening up, the rain was pouring down relentlessly and this, combined with a strong wind, made the driving very hazardous. As Alice was coming home from work, another car from the opposite direction lost control and crossed the median strip, crashing head-on into her car. Fortunately, she was driving a Saab which has a strong body, but even so, she suffered two broken ankles and several head and facial injuries and spent three months in hospital. Thanks to G-d and her iron will, she fully recovered, but her business activity had to be curtailed.

About four years later, I had to undergo a major operation. It was a big blow for me because I had never been in hospital before. However, everything went well with the surgery. Someone must be watching us Up There. We made the hard decision and stopped working.



*With our son,  
Robert, 1995*



## Retirement

We are enjoying our life, spending more time with our family, especially with our grandchildren, with our friends - most of them are in a similar situation - travelling and simply enjoying each other's company. We seldom talk about the future, living almost entirely for the present. With my remaining healthy eye, I wanted to focus on the past, because gradually, as the memory weakens, the past becomes more and more blurred.

When I returned to Sumeg, I felt I was intruding upon sacred ground, sacred to a past which can never return, when the world was young. There are no tombs there to be visited, the only pilgrimage would be to look from time to time at the sky.

The other night I couldn't sleep. So as not to wake up Alice, I quietly went out onto the balcony. The night was peaceful and the new moon visible. The air was fresh after the storm. I sat there for a while when someone suddenly touched me on the shoulder. It was Alice.

'What are you doing here?', she asked me.

'I couldn't sleep, so I am watching the stars.'

'I can't sleep either. Can we watch them together?'

'Yes, of course.'

'What do you think, how many stars are there in the sky?'

'I don't know, maybe six million?'

'Yes, it could be six million.'

'It's time to go to bed.'

Our little grandson Adam was sleeping at our place. On the way back to our room, we bent over the sleeping child, smiling at each other with happiness and left on tiptoe.





USHMM LIBRARY



01 0001 0128 7224

**When David Kaye said good-bye to his parents in 1943 as he left his home town of Sumeg in Hungary, he could not know the fate that would befall them and most other Hungarian Jews - deportation and extermination at Auschwitz. He himself survived the tribulations of forced labour and the return death march. On liberation, he went back to his home town - to find all his loved ones gone.**

**Then began what David calls his 'second life'. Via Austria, Italy and France he and later his new bride, Alice, made the long journey to Australia, where they set about building a new life in another world.**

***I Still Remember* is David's recollections of his home and family life before, during and after the German army rolled into Hungary.**

